



Tracy McEwan

WOMEN AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
Negotiating Identity and Agency

Women and the Catholic Church

Bloomsbury Studies in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau Statistics
ACBC	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
CPCSA	Clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse
CSA	Child sexual abuse
CWC	Catholic Women's Council
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
FLTN	Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network
FUN	Feminists in the Uniting Church
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
Gen X	Generation X
IVF	In vitro fertilization
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual plus
MOW	Movement for the Ordination of Women
NCLS	National Church Life Survey
NCPR	National Centre for Pastoral Research
NIV	New International Version
OCW	Ordination of Catholic Women
RCIRCSA	Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
US	United States of America
WATER	Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

Vatican documents

AL	<i>Amoris laetitia</i>	2016	Post-synodal apostolic exhortation of the Holy Father Francis on love in the family
AM	<i>Antiquum Ministerium</i>	2021	Apostolic Letter issued 'Motu Proprio' by Francis instituting the Ministry of Catechist
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>	1993	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCL	<i>Code of canon law</i>	2021	Code of canon law
DH	<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i>	1965	Second Vatican Council: Declaration on Religious Freedom
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i>	1965	Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
EG	<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>	2013	Apostolic exhortation of the Holy Father Francis on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world
EV	<i>Evangelium Vitae</i>	1995	Encyclical letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the value and inviolability of human life
FS	<i>Fiducia Supplicans</i>	2023	Declaration on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings
FT	<i>Fratelli Tutti</i>	2020	Apostolic letter of the Holy Father Francis on fraternity and social friendship
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>	1965	Second Vatican Council: Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world
HV	<i>Humanae Vitae</i>	1968	Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI on the Regulation of Birth
II	<i>Inter Insigniores</i>	1976	Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Declaration on the question of admission of women to the ministerial Priesthood
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>	1964	Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic constitution on the Church
LS	<i>Laudato Si'</i>	2015	Encyclical letter of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home
LW	<i>Letter to Women</i>	1995	Letter of John Paul II to women

MD	<i>Mulieris Dignitatem</i>	1988	Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women on the occasion of the Marian year
PT	<i>Pacem in Terris</i>	1963	Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty
SD	<i>Spiritus Domini</i>	2021	Apostolic Letter issued 'Motu Proprio' by Francis modifying Canon 230 §1 of the Code of Canon Law regarding access of women to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte
TC	<i>Traditionis Custodes</i>	2021	Apostolic Letter issued 'Motu Proprio' by Francis on the use of the Roman liturgy prior to the reform of 1970

Introduction

For the first time in 2023, a Vatican synod¹ included lay women and men alongside bishops, priests and deacons. The month-long gathering, known as the XVI Synod of Bishops, followed an unparalleled two-year period of consultation and preparation, where input and feedback were sought from Catholics worldwide. The overarching objective was to foster a means of listening and discernment, aimed at enhancing the Catholic Church's interactions with its members and broader society. Just like Vatican II (Second Vatican Council; 1962–5) had done some sixty years earlier, the Synod generated overwhelming hope among Catholics worldwide for a more inclusive Church and a greater role for women in ministry and church leadership. A last-minute decision by Pope Francis granting fifty-four women delegates the unprecedented right to vote during the gathering added to the sense of optimism. Yet, despite strong support for a greater role for women in church leadership and governance in the consultation phase and some positive comments in the Synod's synthesis report about recognizing and valuing women's contribution, proposals did not mention any change in women's roles (General Secretariat of the Synod 2023). In a May 2024 interview with US journalist Norah O'Donnell, Pope Francis expressed firm opposition to even the idea of the ordination of women as deacons (O'Donnell 2024). With expectations dashed women are questioning their place in a Catholic Church that fails to listen to women's pleas for full equality in every aspect of church life.

The lack of movement in the situation of women in Catholicism was not a surprise. When I began the doctoral research that underpins this book in 2016, I attended Mass weekly, volunteered as catechist² and worked part-time for a Catholic diocese. As I write this in early 2024, I am unsure that I identify as 'Catholic' anymore. I am, like the participants in the research study that underpins this book, part of Gen X (Generation X), the generational cohort

¹ A meeting of Catholic bishops tasked with assisting the pope with church governance.

² Teacher of Christian doctrine or catechesis.

born between 1965 and 1980. We received our Catholic formation after Vatican II without the powerful discourse, ideology and solidarity that characterized Catholic culture for earlier generations of Catholic women. Like many Gen X Catholic women, I was educated by nuns.³ They and the other women in my sphere of influence taught me that I could achieve whatever I wanted. While ‘being Catholic’ informed how I lived my life and raised my children, it did not greatly impact my life decisions. Through my twenties and into my thirties, I didn’t think much about feminism or the ordination of women. This would change very quickly once I went public with my intention to study women in the Catholic Church.

After announcing my intended study, I was taken aside by a manager in my Catholic workplace and warned not to discuss my research topic with ‘anyone’. A short time later, at a workplace morning tea, I was approached by a Catholic priest who knew of my research. After the usual greetings, he questioned me.

‘Tracy, do you know that God made Mary the most holy woman ever?’

‘Um, yes,’ I replied.

‘Yes,’ he persisted, ‘God made Mary the most holy person ever placed on the earth, but he put Joseph in charge of her.’

At the time I was baffled. What was it that was so dangerous about studying Catholic women? What were they afraid I would discover?

This book is about Catholic women. It explores women’s identities and agency in the Catholic Church through the stories and experiences of the thirty-six Gen X Catholic women in Australia. Yet, it also tells my story and the stories of countless other women who day by day negotiate lived Catholicism and live out the consequences of not being recognized as a ‘good Catholic woman’.

Women in Catholicism

Throughout the millennia, Catholic tradition, texts and symbols have been interpreted to justify the social dominance and religious power of men. Today, even though Catholic women are responsible for much of the day-to-day running of the Church, they continue to be marginalized by patriarchal discourse and a leadership structure wherein decision-making is the prerogative of an all-male

³ Women who undertake a public profession of vows promising a life-long commitment to the Church and its mission (CCC: 914). Herein, the terms ‘nun’, ‘religious sister’ and ‘women religious’ are used interchangeably.

episcopacy. Even with the recent shift towards synodality, sole authority in doctrinal and moral matters remains with the *magisterium*⁴ or official teaching office of the Catholic Church, which is exercised exclusively by the pope and bishops. Women have no role in the establishment or maintenance of doctrine, even those teachings that impact them directly.

Many Catholic women are choosing to distance themselves from church-based participation, not because of lost faith or Catholic identity but due to the struggle associated with women's rights and church teachings. This includes concerns related to access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people, financial mismanagement, corruption and the exploitation of female church workers (Hunt 2021, 2023; McAleese 2023; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a, 2023b). Misgivings are further exacerbated by awareness of the prevalence of sexual, spiritual, physical and emotional abuse in church contexts (Dixon 2023; Doyle 2017; Haslbeck et al. 2020; Hunt 2020). Conversely, some women find deep joy in Catholic ritual and sacramentality and elect to stay and grapple with and against patriarchal theology and structures (Beattie 2018; McKinley 2012; Rymarz 2022).

This book is an exploration of women's struggle to make sense of their lives against the backdrop of a masculinist church and theology. It is premised on and introduces a new methodological approach for the study of women's identities and agency in patriarchal religious institutions. By problematizing and calling into question notions of power, authority and knowledge in Catholicism, it will address, critique and develop possibilities for women to chart their own futures in relation to the Catholic Church. Herein, I present and use the methodological approach of *feminist theological genealogy* to provide a framework for analysis of the narratives of women. In the remainder of this chapter, I will introduce key concepts and methodological concerns.

Foucault's genealogical approach

The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault contends that nothing, including concepts, categories and institutional systems of power-knowledge that appear fundamental, need simply be accepted. He proposes that a refusal to accept what is presented as natural, necessary or normal creates possibilities for developing alternative modes of thought and existence (Foucault 1977, 1980,

⁴ Derived from the Latin word *magister* or teacher.

2010a). Foucault uses two methodological frameworks to analyse the power dimensions of discourse. In the method he calls an 'archaeology', he investigates the production of discourses of truth and their correlation with systems of order, appropriation and exclusion (Welch 1985). 'Genealogy' is the approach that Foucault uses to explore events, ideas, values and doctrines as systems of power-knowledge within or against the claims of a particular body of theory (Foucault 2003b).

Foucault developed genealogy as a method and methodological approach to provide an account of how power and knowledge operate and constitute subjectivity in relation to a practice or institution. In his various genealogical analyses, Foucault shows how concepts and practices adopted by institutions and social groups are not ontologically fixed but socially constructed. By illustrating that this construction is not always and everywhere the same, he explicitly addresses the inherent and intrinsic relationship between resistance and domination within discourse. In his genealogies of crime and the penal system in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and the construct of sexuality in his four-volume *The History of Sexuality* (1988a, 1990a, 1990b, 2021), Foucault encapsulates how patterns of power and resistance function over time to create subjectivity. Genealogy, however, is not a history in any conventional sense.

Foucault utilized genealogy as a method to deconstruct, critique and reimagine the contours of present cultural and moral imaginaries. Debunking the notion that practices, identities and institutions are constructed in a linear and cumulative manner, Foucault questions the legitimacy of continuous histories and totalizing theories. He examines ideas, principles and beliefs that have been lost within a dominant, all-encompassing regime or theoretical framework. For instance, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), by locating a discontinuity between pre-modern and modern penal practices, Foucault is able to challenge the notion of continuous histories and discourses and bring into question the historical contingency of contemporary prison systems.

This book seeks to look beyond Catholicism as a monolithic, top-down, institutional authority to permit an exploration of the multi-layered influences, experiences and knowledges that work together in the formation and enactment of identities. In Catholicism, power-knowledge is produced by the magisterium but is also visible when women and other marginalized groups enact and resist hegemonic discourses. Genealogy presents a method and methodological approach for exploring dynamics of power-knowledge and exposing what kinds of ideas, conditions, categories and processes act together in forming women's Catholic identities and agency, and to what effect.

Methodological signposts – kyriarchy and intersectionality

The concepts of kyriarchy and intersectionality are central to this analysis and synthesis of issues related to Catholic women's agency and identities. In Catholicism discourses have the potential to be both destructive and emancipatory. Accordingly, women's agency and engagement happen within a framework of gender negotiated with other interwoven axes of oppression and liberation.

Intersectionality is theoretical framework and means of analysis which considers the interconnectedness of various structures of oppression. The field of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how the dynamics of sameness and difference function to extend or limit oppressions when individual characteristics and subjectivities 'intersect' with one another and overlap. Intersectionality originated as a specific way to understand Black women's experiences. It has since been applied to understanding the complexities of oppression and privilege across various marginalized groups (Page and Shipley 2020).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) coined the term *kyriarchy* to mean the sociopolitical system of oppression that is based on the rule of the lord, master or father. Understood through a framework of intersectionality, kyriarchy signifies the complex graded pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative, sociopolitical relations of domination and subordination that marginalize women and all who are marked as inferior or dependent by notions of race, class, age, gender, sexuality, nationhood or culture (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016).

Intersectionality moves an analysis of identity away from the conception of gender as a single-focus framework and illuminates how various facets of personhood act as co-constitutive factors which intersect and interact with other systems and dynamics of power (Page and Shipley 2020). In a similar way, intersectionality shifts an analysis of agency from a resistance versus subversion dichotomy to a more multifaceted and paradoxical concept where multiple factors shape and constrain how individual and collective choices and actions are articulated and negotiated. This understanding acknowledges that in religious contexts agency is a complex and vast spectrum of overt and nuanced emotional, intellectual and behavioural strategies and tactics which involve negotiations with intersecting identities, norms and discourses in a rapidly changing sociocultural context. The concepts of kyriarchy and intersectionality are helpful not only in the deconstructive task of denaturalizing hegemonic

power dynamics in Catholicism but also in envisioning an alternate social-ecclesial imaginary.

Feminist theologies

Feminist theologies have long noted the power of images and symbols in discourse to act as ecclesial structures of power, domination and exclusion that shape Catholic women's experiences and identities (e.g. Abraham 2019; Althaus-Reid 2002; Johnson 2002a; Radford Ruether 1981; Schüssler Fiorenza 1993, 2009, 2016). In feminist theologies, the experiences of women are an important source of empowerment against oppressive traditions, ideologies and practices, including gender-based discrimination, sexism, racism and colonialism. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza maintains the task of a feminist theological analysis is to deconstruct power relations that are inscribed in language, scripture and symbols to undertake 'the reconstructive task of envisioning a different world, society, and religious community free from domination' (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016: 10). Accordingly, in this feminist theological work I seek to critically engage in conversation with women's lives to (1) investigate the power dynamics interwoven into women's experiences of the Catholic Church; (2) explore overlooked, suppressed and alternative wisdoms; and (3) articulate and envision a place for women to belong to a community of faith and flourish. Each of these undertakings will take into account intersectionality, kyriarchal power dynamics and the diverse and multidimensional character of women's lives, making the stories and experiences of women the locus of analysis.

Genealogy as a method and methodology

Foucault used genealogy to deconstruct and critique cultural and moral imaginaries. However, his genealogical method and methodological approach do not specifically deal with the disciplines of religion or theology. Instead, Foucault addresses religion and theology as part of a broader system of power-knowledge shaped by history within social and cultural institutions (e.g. see Foucault 1983: 213–15). In his inquiries, Foucault presupposes that Christianity and indeed all religion arises from issues concerned with humanity. The concern is not any connection with a special realm but rather how religion positions language, practices, teachings and rituals to exert control over individuals

and society more broadly (Jordan 2015). Thus, Catholicism and its moral and ecclesial imaginary are situated as a set of discursive power-knowledge relations shaped by human history, culture and gender.

Foucault's perspective, which presents 'church' as a wholly human, sociological reality, has the potential to be problematic in a theological study. In magisterial discourse, the Catholic Church is defined as a mystery or a sacrament,⁵ an arcane reality wherein the presence of God is hidden yet active (McBrien 2009; Paul VI 1963). This means that Catholicism and the Church are not to be seen merely as a religion, institution or a human or sociological society alongside other such societies but as a theological reality and a demonstration of God – present and active redemptively in the world.

A task critical to feminist theologies is the deconstruction of kyriarchal power relations that are inscribed in religious imaginaries. Women are and have always been part of Christian tradition and the Catholic Church (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009). I contend that 'church', as the human story of God, lives on in the community of the people of God who give witness to the message of the Gospel. This locates the basic loci of all theology in the lived reality and embodied actions of the people of God. A genealogy of women in the Catholic Church is therefore much more than a study of magisterial theology and the gendered discourse it generates. Gen X Catholic women in Australia, as a cohort, share a collective social, historical and cultural situation. Their experiences, stories and identities are not fixed or natural but are constructed from a multitude of intersecting and complex knowledges; they have a genealogy that can be explored.

A feminist theological genealogy of Gen X Catholic women

Using the methodological principles of genealogy, this book presents a feminist theological analysis of narrative data from a research study of Gen X women in Australia who currently or previously self-identified as Catholic. The term Gen X was popularized by Douglas Coupland (1991) to indicate the demographic cohort that follows the Baby Boomer generation (the age cohort born between 1 January 1946 and 31 December 1964) and precedes Gen Y (born between 1 January 1981 and 31 December 2000). Herein, I use the concept of generation not to homogenize Gen X or other age cohorts but to conceptualize their social,

⁵ A sacrament is a sign or instrument of grace, instituted by Jesus Christ and entrusted to the Catholic Church (CCC: 774).

historical and cultural situation within the Catholic Church in Australia. In a Foucauldian sense, narrative accounts are discursive practices through which individuals are able to make sense of themselves in relation to various systems of power-knowledge (Foucault 1997b). The narrative accounts of participants thus emerge in relation to the contexts in which Gen X women find themselves. This means that they are saturated in power-knowledge relations and can be analysed as critical technologies of self-formation.

The research study that underpins this book was carried out in 2018–19 as part of my doctoral study at the University of Newcastle, Australia, with approval of its *Human Research Ethics Committee* (HREC Approval No. H-2017–0205; McEwan 2022). Thirty-six study participants were selected from the cohort of Gen X women in Australia, using purposive, non-random sampling to support the gathering of narratives from women with different levels of adherence, practice, affiliation and commitment (see Table 1). To be included in the research project, all participants must have been born between 1 January 1965 and 31 December 1980, identify as female, be a permanent resident of Australia and currently or previously have identified as Catholic. Herein, I use the term ‘woman’ inclusively to refer to individuals who identify as female, irrespective of assigned sex. This expansive understanding acknowledges and respects the diverse ways people experience and express their gender. As the study drew on women’s experiences, self-identification was the only criterion required to classify a woman as Catholic.

To ensure the inclusion of participants with different levels of adherence, practice and commitment, potential participants were asked to self-identify with one of three typological groups. The groups included *engaged* Catholic women, self-identifying Catholics who indicate that their Catholic faith and practices are an important part of their lives; *disengaged* Catholic women, self-identifying Catholics who are loosely affiliated with the Catholic tradition; and *disaffiliated* Catholic women, previously self-identifying Catholics who have now ceased to identify as Catholic. The engaged group consists of fourteen women born between 1965 and 1976; they are known in this study as Monica, Lucy, Eleanor, Violet, Billie, Bernadette, Prudence, Agatha, Elizabeth, Regina, Martha, Josephine, Lizbeth and Veronica. The disengaged group is made up of fourteen women born between 1965 and 1980; they have the pseudonyms Frances, Emma, Ruby, Libby, Stella, Chloe, Marline, Kim, Mari, Nanette, Patricia, Layla, Miriam and Luanne. The group that self-classifies as disaffiliated is made up of eight women born between 1965 and 1977; they are known in this study as Helen, Skye, Grace, Nora, Audrey, Antonia, Gemma and Ava. Of the Gen X

Table 1 Participant Information

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Self-classification
Agatha	1973	engaged
Antonia	1975	disaffiliated
Audrey	1973	disaffiliated
Ava	1977	disaffiliated
Bernadette	1967	engaged
Billie	1967	engaged
Chloe	1967	disengaged
Eleanor	1976	engaged
Elizabeth	1966	engaged
Emma	1965	disengaged
Frances	1965	disengaged
Gemma	1977	disaffiliated
Grace	1970	disaffiliated
Helen	1965	disaffiliated
Josephine	1966	engaged
Kim	1970	disengaged
Layla	1976	disengaged
Libby	1966	disengaged
Lizbeth	1966	engaged
Luanne	1980	disengaged
Lucy	1969	engaged
Marline	1969	disengaged
Martha	1968	engaged
Mari	1972	disengaged
Miriam	1977	disengaged
Monica	1970	engaged
Nanette	1974	disengaged
Nora	1972	disaffiliated
Patricia	1974	disengaged
Prudence	1965	engaged
Regina	1974	engaged
Ruby	1966	disengaged
Skye	1969	disaffiliated
Stella	1967	disengaged
Veronica	1972	engaged
Violet	1970	engaged

women interviewed, thirty-one were born in Australia, three were born overseas in a non-English-speaking country and two were born overseas in an English-speaking country. Participants were not asked to identify their race, nationality or cultural heritage, although some participants disclosed this information. During their interviews, each of these women shared with me the story of their involvement in Catholicism.

Potential participants were invited to take part in one-to-one, informal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews in a safe and neutral site of their choosing. Interviews were conversational in tone, and reflexivity was practised throughout the interview process. As a white woman and settler living on unceded land, I acknowledge the ways that Christianity and coloniality shape my perspectives and assign me privilege in contemporary Australian society. The practice of reflexivity ensured that, as a researcher, I was aware of any relationship or positionality that might affect the interview and allowed adaptations to be made where appropriate. Interviews were directed by a set of questions; however, the informal, conversational style of interviews meant that questions could be adapted to the unfolding process of the interview, with care taken not to impose ideas or beliefs on participants. Prior to and during the interview, guided by formal ethical principles, participants were reassured that they were under no obligation to answer any questions that made them feel uneasy and could withdraw at any time.

The narratives of each participant were collected as data, which were subsequently analysed and interpreted. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were codified using NVivo software, which provides the capability to categorize, classify and arrange information in order to examine relationships and themes in the data. Coding was carried out in a series of stages based on a modified grounded theory approach (Knickmeyer et al. 2003; Shooter 2018).

This book was written from the understanding that the interview process allowed participants to recall and recount their own life experiences. I have no way of verifying the veracity of each participant's statement or claims. However, I approached their narratives with the conviction that each individual woman is a credible and reliable producer of knowledge related to their own life. Throughout the book, I quote extensively from interviews and use vignettes to provide short narrative accounts of women's experiences. The quotations and short accounts are used as a way of presenting women's stories directly alongside the critical analysis. Rather than isolating these narratives in a separate appendix, this method allows for a deeper engagement between analysis and experience.

Positionality in the analytical process

Conducting qualitative research as an insider, or someone who shares characteristics, roles or experiences with their participants, presents both benefits and challenges. Indeed, when researchers conduct research of populations of which they are also members, they gain the advantage of shared identity, language and experiential base (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Familiarity, which can mean better access to hard-to-reach cohorts and common ground, can also present challenges during the research processes.

I approached the research which underpins this book from my positionality as a Gen X Catholic woman. As I carried out, listened to and transcribed interviews and re-read and coded transcripts, I faced the challenge of the analytical process being overshadowed by my own experiences. Further, common ground, which meant sharing the collective memories of a generation, also meant shared trauma. In one instance, I was halfway through an interview when I realized the convicted priest perpetrator my participant was speaking about had been my parish priest during my teenage years. As I struggled with the high level of reported clergy perpetrated child sexual abuse (CPCSA) and the psychological and spiritual harm described by participants, ethical self-care became a priority. Alongside the support of my personal and professional networks, I received counselling to deal with the impact on my emotional state and mental health.

When I began to speak publicly about the harm women experience day to day in Catholic settings, something I didn't anticipate happened – I experienced significant backlash. Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed (2021, 2023) describes the hostile response to raising the issue of gender-based violence in institutional settings in one of her core killjoy truths: 'If you expose a problem, you pose a problem: if you pose a problem, you become a problem' (Ahmed 2023: 18). In addition to the initial 'push back' from a manager in my Catholic workplace, I was told that I was 'obsessed with power' and would never get a job in the Catholic Church. A person even asked if I was citing 'proper' (I think they meant male) theologians. I now recognize this treatment as one of the consequences of not being recognized as a 'good Catholic woman'.

Within the framework of feminist theological genealogy, the chapters of this book are arranged to place the multifaceted lived experiences of Gen X women in Australia in dialogue with the doctrines, structures, actions and practices of the Catholic Church. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 begins with a theorizing of identity, agency and socio-historical context. Chapter 3 then critically analyses magisterial ecclesiology and contests fixed identity positions

and conceptions in Catholicism. Bringing together Michel Foucault's theories about the dynamics of discourse with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Chapter 4 conceptualizes how agency can be enabled and disabled as women perform and negotiate systems of power and knowledge in Catholicism. The major section of this work, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 produce a genealogy of Gen X women's identities and participation, exploring how women's agency is manifest through recognizability as a 'good Catholic woman'. The final chapter imagines a theological and ecclesial vision for church that might provide women a place to 'be church' and belong to a community of faith and flourish.

Identity and authority

Just after I began researching Catholic women, I attended a conference for Catholic youth ministers. Not knowing many people at the conference, I sat near a group of women at lunch and joined their conversation. They began to discuss research about Catholic women, referring only to Mass attendees. I interjected and asked whether they had considered women who are Catholic but no longer attend Mass. A woman in the group responded, 'People who do not attend Mass do not deserve to be able to call themselves Catholic.'

This chapter explores two questions raised in the epitaph that are central to this book: 'What constitutes a Catholic identity?' and 'Who has the authority to determine if a Catholic identity is genuine?' Too often there is an assumption that a 'religion' is a group or community of individuals, more or less organized, who share a belief system and a set of rituals and practices. This understanding posits that a valid or authentic 'religious identity' is the enactment of a restricted set of institutionally defined, 'legitimate', 'ideal' beliefs, behaviours and ritual practices. As the structures of authority in religious organizations and institutions are typically male, women have little agency in the establishment or maintenance of these boundaries of religious identification. Women's involvement in religious organizations and institutions is often limited by particularized understandings of gender and sexuality, which legitimize and reinforce essentialist, category-focused conceptions of identity.

In Catholicism, identity and subjectivity are naturalized through a cultural and sociopolitical doctrinal framework through which adherents make sense and meaning. Discourses governing Catholic women circulate and are regulated to maintain certain subject positions and mindsets. A symbolic, idealized

female body and essentialist formulations of motherhood and femininity locate womanhood in relation to the enactment of particularized gendered roles and responsibilities (McGuire 2002; Schüssler Fiorenza 2016). This diminishes women's status and participation. Many women leave Catholicism, not because they have abandoned their faith but because of conflict with teaching and doctrine around gender and sexuality. Others stay and negotiate the paradox and ambiguity of the co-mingling of sacramentality, grace and misogyny that characterizes contemporary Catholicism (Beattie 2018; McAleese 2023).

The impacts of discourses around sexuality and gendered identities in Catholicism extend far beyond the pastoral concerns of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is a significant institution in Australian life. It encompasses a wide range of organizations, religious institutes, rites and cultural and language groups under the regulation of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and the Holy See, with a common doctrine and law (ACBC 2021c). One-fifth of the adult population of Australia nominate Catholic as their religious affiliation (ABS 2022). The rise of post-secularism has positioned Catholicism in the public sphere, meaning that there is no stable boundary between the public and private for Catholic women. The Catholic Church is a significant provider of government-funded healthcare, education and welfare services and is one of the largest non-government property owners, by value, in Australia (Dixon et al. 2017; Millar, Schneiders and Vedelago 2018). In 2016–17 the Catholic Church employed 1.8 per cent of the Australian workforce, which amounts to close to 1 per cent of the Australian census population; three-quarters (77 per cent) of this workforce were women (Dixon et al. 2017). The Australian government's exemption of religious organizations from certain sections of human rights laws and anti-discrimination legislation enables the Catholic Church to enact gender politics in their employment practices and service provisions (Bouma et al. 2011; Poulos 2018). This can permit workplace discrimination related to doctrine on gender and sexuality.

Gender relations in Catholicism determine which public and private spaces can be occupied by men and which are allocated to women; 'this in effect allows a particular (masculinist) theological interpretation of faith tradition to be understood as the definition of religion' (McPhillips 2020: 29). Feminist theologies do critically analyse and contest essentialist conceptions and identity positions relating kyriarchal inscriptions on women's spaces. Naomi Goldenberg (2014), however, asserts that what feminist studies have failed to do is deconstruct and contest religion as a fixed category in a similar manner. She contends that

unless sex and religion are 'deconstructed concurrently, their vocabularies end up reinforcing complacent notions of each category and can encourage a regressive trajectory for theory and critique' (Goldenberg 2014: 253). I agree and argue that religious identity as a fixed, universal category or social fact requires deconstruction and critique.

Michel Foucault's theory of the relationship between power and knowledge contests the notion of identity as a contingent, immutable category or historically contingent part of society (Foucault 1977, 1980, 2010b). Foucault (1980) argues identities are formed when truth, power and knowledge interact to constitute subjectivity. I draw on Foucault's notion that identities are discursively constructed and performed within a network of power-knowledge to claim that religious identities are not fixed but instead are created from a complex matrix of cultural understandings and institutional and individual beliefs, experiences and practices. In this chapter, through an analysis of key literature around Catholic identity, I look beyond a relativistic notion of Catholicism as a monolithic, institutional, top-down authoritarian regime to propose that women use agency to construct, negotiate and perform their Catholic identities through a multi-layered network of institutional authority, lived experiences and personal autonomy. Then, I contextualize and position Gen X women as a cohort with a shared socio-historical and cultural situation and set of formative experiences, locating and synthesizing the issues pertinent to how Gen X Catholic women construct and perform their identities.

The formation of religious identities

Religious institutions and scholars of religion often seek to establish boundaries around what constitutes a legitimate 'religious identity'. Yet, what individuals nominate as their 'religion' or 'religious identity' and what their beliefs, practices and religious community look like and mean to them do not always fit neatly with any institutional or scholarly expectation (McGuire 2002, 2008; Stringer 2013). One of the difficulties with scholarship about Catholic women is that it often prioritizes institutionalized, church-orientated practices and beliefs. This means that a wide range of religious and spiritual behaviours are not included as measurable criteria of Catholic identity. Research studies that ignore the rich diversity of women's expressions of faith and belief have limited use in understanding the dynamics of theological and sociological change in Catholicism and its impact on women.

In sociological literature, a group of scholars has developed the notion of lived or everyday religion to theorize how religious or spiritual attitudes, identities, beliefs and practices are experienced in everyday life, both in concert with and in opposition to authoritarian discourses (Ammerman 2014, 2021; Hall 1997; Hurd 2015; McGuire 2008, 2016). David Hall (1997) coined the expression 'lived religion' to describe how religion is expressed in daily life through everyday practices, rituals and encounters in a particular context and social setting. Meredith McGuire maintains that the concept of lived religion 'is useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices' (McGuire 2008: 8). Lived religion, however, does not place boundaries on the sacred and profane. It incorporates how the material body encounters the spiritual in everyday embodied practices and experiences, taking seriously the many different and individual ways people live their lives. The concept of lived religion encourages a view of religion beyond any formally recognized institutionalized or authoritarian narrative that might dictate what is or is not religious.

In her study of the politics of religious freedom and violent extremism, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) extends previous theories of religion and develops a heuristic tool to draw attention not just to different forms of religiosity and sociality but also to how religious narratives might be constructed and governed by authoritarian and other discourses. Hurd (2015) disaggregates religion into three distinct categories: expert religion, governed or official religion and lived religion. She describes *lived or everyday religion* as 'religion as practiced by ordinary individuals and groups as they interact with a variety of religious authorities, rituals, texts and institutions and seek to navigate and make sense of their lives, connections with others and place in the world' (Hurd 2015: 3).

Hurd's category of lived religion is meant to direct attention to everyday practices that sit both within and beyond the confines of expert and official or governed religion. *Expert religion* is defined by Hurd as 'religion as construed by those who generate policy-relevant knowledge about religion, including scholars, policy experts, and government officials' (Hurd 2015: 2). Expert religious narratives are used in academic disciplines, such as sociology and political science, and tend to define religion as a specific, isolable, normative object, construed as singular and preceding other identities and types of social interaction. Hurd advises that her category of *governed or official religion* refers to 'religion as construed for the purposes of law and governance by those in positions of political and religious authority' (Hurd 2015: 2); this includes global and local governments and religious organizations and institutions at all levels.

I intentionally separate and extend Hurd's categories of governed and official religion and classify *official* religion as an authoritarian discourse set out by religious organizations for the purpose of overseeing and regulating adherents. Official religious narratives use institutionally prescribed markers of belief and practice as the core indicators of religious identity. This aligns with the scholarship of McGuire, who delineates official religion as 'a set of beliefs and practices prescribed, regulated, and socialized by organized specifically religious groups. These groups set norms of belief and action for their members, and they establish an official model of what it means to be "one of us"' (McGuire 2002: 104).

I define *governed* religion as discourse used by local and international governments for the purpose of managing and controlling official religious organizations and, by association, their adherents. I contend that lived, expert, governed and official religion each have separate but entwined narratives and purposes and that they can act effectively as a scaffold to theorize the discursive frameworks that women use to construct, negotiate and perform their Catholic identities.

Categorizing religious identities

Several scholars have come up with metaphors to describe and theorize the nature of religious identities that sit beyond expert, governed or official narratives in Christian organizations (Davie 1994, 2000; Day 2011; Voas 2009). For instance, Grace Davie (1994, 2000) coined the phrase 'believing without belonging' to describe people in Britain who tend not to attend church or score highly in other quantitative measures of religiosity but maintain deep-seated religious ideals. David Voas uses the term 'fuzzy fidelity' to depict a group of Europeans who, according to standard expert measures of religiosity, 'are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously nonreligious' (Voas 2009: 155). Voas (2009) argues that, despite casual loyalty and residual involvement in Christianity, religion still plays a role in the lives of this cohort. Both the terms 'believing without belonging' and 'fuzzy fidelity' suggest that individual identities that do not comply exactly with the parameters set by official religion are somehow a *non bona fide* microcosm of a grand narrative. I argue that religious belongings, beliefs and behaviours find expression in a multiplicity of combinations and orderings of meaning that are elaborated independently or in harmony with official and expert religious narratives.

Abby Day (2011) uses the term ‘performative belief’ to theorize the process or performative act of claiming Christianity as a social identity. For Day, Christian identity ‘is not pre-formed but a lived, embodied performance, brought into being through action and where the object of worship is not an entity such as a god or “society”, but the experience of belonging’ (Day 2011: 194). This locates religious identification as a relational social marker vulnerable to misinterpretation. In a discussion regarding her participants who claim a Christian identity, Day observes the following:

To be a Christian, for them, did not include participating in liturgy or ritual, or engaging with Christian principles such as faith in God, the resurrection, or the life of Jesus. It was an ascribed identity from which they could not apparently disassociate themselves. The criteria of ascription and, therefore, criteria for membership, varied during the interviews: sometimes, it only required being ‘named’ through baptism; sometimes it was conferred by attending church when children; sometimes it was only by being born into what was described as a Christian country and therefore becoming a member of the Christian ‘culture.’ (Day 2011: 180)

Day (2011) cautions against regarding this type of self-identification as notional or irrelevant. She contends that ‘nominalism is far from an insignificant, empty category but a social, performative act, bringing into being a specific kind of Christian identity’ (Day 2011: 174). The location of the process of identification in a performative social act acknowledges Christian identities as socially constructed knowledge.

What is a Catholic identity?

The notion that the Catholic identities of women are both performative and socially constructed is central to this work. Theoretically, the universal nature of Catholicism ought to ensure a uniform continuance of belief and ritual practice (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Yet, even in Australia there is currently no single normative expression of Catholic beliefs, practices and characteristics common to all Catholic adherents. I argue that as socially constructed knowledges, Catholic identities are not atomistic or fixed and immutable but are instead embedded in socio-historical and structural contexts, lived and embodied experiences and individual, institutional and cultural power relations and legitimations.

Global research on how women negotiate their identities within Catholicism has established that women will contextually juxtapose agency and compliance

to doctrine and Church law when constructing their Catholic identities (Calderón Muñoz 2016; Dillon 1999; Leming 2007; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a, 2023b). In a study of diversity in individual adherents who retain their Catholic identities while denouncing official Catholic teachings, Michele Dillon (1999) uses the notion of a socially constructed reality to explain that it is through the reality of everyday life experiences that Catholic adherents gain knowledge and form their identities. In her study of Catholic women in the United States, Laura Leming (2007) explains how religious agency allows individuals to build an autonomous identity that challenges and is separate from a traditional or official Catholic identity that was once seen as permanent and absolute. This aligns with the findings of María Calderón Muñoz, who notes that, in Ecuador, it is a woman's class, ethnicity and 'past experiences as women, wives, mothers and professionals as well as inner processes of self-reflexivity' (Calderón Muñoz 2016: 34) that provides women with agency within a religious organization and assists them in constructing Catholic identities disconnected from official teachings. The *International Survey of Catholic Women* (ISCW; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a, 2023b) also found Catholic women's identities are constructed and performed from a complex mix of cultural, institutional and theological discourses.

There is increasing recognition among theologians and sociologists of religion that, under the canopy of the Catholic Church, there is a plurality of everyday, lived Catholic identities (Beaudoin 2011; Bullivant 2019; Hervieu-Léger 2000). Even so, there is an ideological struggle in expert and official Catholicism over what constitutes a legitimate Catholic identity. An official narrative attempts to dictate what it constitutes as authentic Catholic belief and practice by prioritizing the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church and privileging declarations of the magisterium. The magisterium, as the official teaching office of the Catholic Church, assumes the task of ensuring the Church's fidelity to the teachings of the apostles in matters of faith and morals (CCC: 85, 890). It sets out in Church law and its catechism that an essential criterion for membership of the Catholic Church is receipt of the sacrament of baptism (CCC: 1272; CCL: 204). Baptism is a sacrament of Christian initiation by which a person (typically an infant) receives remission of original and personal sin and begins a new life in Jesus Christ (CCC: 1213). Accompanying Catholic baptism is a set of irrevocable obligations of heart, mind and action (CCL: 208–31). Central to magisterial teachings and Catholic baptismal obligations is the regular reception of the Eucharist and participation in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church (CCC: 1324–7; LG: 11). The Mass, as a Eucharistic celebration, is Catholicism's

principal communal ritual (CCC: 1328–32), and Catholic adherents are obliged by Church law to attend Mass on Sundays (or Saturday evenings) and other specified holy days (CCL: 1247, 1248).

According to Church law, a parish is a ‘certain community’ of Catholic adherents who are ‘stably established’ within a particular diocese, whose pastoral care is delegated (by the diocesan bishop) to a pastor, usually described as a ‘parish priest’. A local parish in Australia is considered by expert and official Catholicism as the centre of Catholic community participation and ritual practice (Dixon 2005). As a general rule, such a parish is territorial; that is, it includes all the Catholic adherents in a certain geographic area or territory (CCL: 518; Dixon 2005). Yet only Catholics who attend Mass each week and participate in the sacramental life of a parish are deemed to be actively living a ‘Catholic life’ (Beaudoin 2011). By these measures, the Catholic Church in Australia is currently facing a crisis of identity and participation.

Data around parish involvement and Mass attendance in Australia shows a significant pattern of decline, with most self-identifying Catholics rarely or never attending Mass or participating in sacramental life in parishes. In 2021 the ACBC National Count of Attendance was carried out over four Sundays during May (among Covid-19 pandemic restrictions). Attendance was counted at all Masses (and Sunday assemblies in the absence of a priest), wherever they were held, including in parishes, other Mass centres, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, religious houses, universities, boarding schools and other chaplaincies (Dantis et al. 2024). The National Count revealed that the number of people attending in a Catholic parish on an average weekend was approximately 417,349 or 8.2 per cent of the Australian Catholic census population. This was a drop of 206,007 or 3.6 per cent from the 2016 figures. Some twenty-five years ago, in 1996, 18 per cent of Australia’s Catholic population (or 864,000 people) attended Mass on an average weekend in a Catholic parish (Dantis et al. 2024). In addition to a decline in Mass attendance, Vatican statistics relating to the conferring of the sacraments of baptism, marriage, first communion and confirmation in Australia show a drop in parish sacramental participation (NCPR 2021).

Despite the majority of Catholic adherents in Australia rarely or never attending Mass, expert and official Catholicism still uses church attendance as the core indicator for Catholic identity, overlooking other forms of lived *praxis*. This can present difficulties for those seeking to understand factors that are impacting Catholic adherents. When comparing the Catholic population, as a whole entity, it is generally probable that Catholic Mass attendees are more likely to be female, university educated, aged over fifty years, born overseas and speak

a language other than English in their home than Catholics who do not attend Mass. Census-only identifying Catholics are more likely to be either never married or divorced (NCPR 2020).

Catholics who are absent from parish sacramental life or are occasional, rare or nearly never Mass attendees are often referred to in official Catholic and expert academic literature (and indeed by themselves) as ‘lapsed’, ‘recovering’, ‘non-practicing’, ‘secular’, ‘religiously illiterate’, ‘relativistic’, ‘inactive’, ‘bad’, ‘fallen away’ or ‘nominal’ Catholics. These terms infer a type of ‘fuzzy fidelity’ or ‘believing without belonging.’ Yet, I argue such associations and identities can be deeply socially located and loaded and should not be dismissed as vague, fuzzy or benign. Care should be taken against grouping Catholics into moralistic, normative categories which do not take lived praxis into account. Catholic identities are socially constructed and therefore should not be judged as lacking. No Catholic self-identification should be dismissed or discounted as nominal, notional or irrelevant.

Catholicism is both voluntary and interpretive, so Catholic adherents enjoy a certain autonomy of construction that transcends – and is outside the control of the magisterium. Catholic identities are typically a simultaneous counterbalance of official and lived Catholic narratives that are largely self-determined. Invoking the authority of official Catholicism is a deliberate choice, a way of being and self-identifying that is tied to and sustained by, among other things, a religious chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Magisterial and other institutional discourses circulate through a network of ‘faith-managers’ (including, but not limited to, bishops, priests, theologians and parish workers) who manufacture orthodoxy as real, central and normative for faith and subjectivity in ‘ordinary’ Catholics (Beaudoin and Hornbeck 2013). Yet, through a series of decisions and considerations that evolve with and against official Catholic discourse, Catholic adherents ultimately decide what they consider a valid Catholic subjectivity and identity based on their own religious and cultural socialization.

The sociocultural formation of Gen X Catholics

Having established that Catholic identities are formed, bound and influenced by a complex mix of socio-historical contexts and power relations, I now use the concept of generation to locate and contextualize the social, historical and cultural situation of Gen X Catholic women in Australia. This is not an attempt to homogenize the group or imply a universality of experience; rather, it is an

acknowledgement of a shared chronological history and collective memory that sits alongside other aspects of self, such as gender, class, race, sexuality and ability. Accordingly, I now locate and synthesize the issues pertinent to how Gen X Catholic women construct and perform their identities. I examine the sociocultural location of Gen X, the impact of feminism and the women's movement and the influence of Vatican II as a possible vehicle for reform.

Beginning in the 1960s, after the completion of Vatican II, alterations in liturgical and sacramental practice compelled new perceptions of the Catholic Church as an institution, fundamentally transforming Catholic culture (Ormerod 2014). In Australia, sectarian culture, or division and conflict between Protestants and Catholics, which had impacted educational experiences, social interactions and employment opportunities for Catholics during the early to mid-twentieth century, began to break down. For Gen X Catholics in Australia, being brought up in the post-conciliar period meant their formative and young adult experiences lacked the powerful ideology and images of Catholic and sectarian culture that served to bond earlier generations.

In the absence of a pervasive Catholic culture, the identities of many Gen X Catholics have been affected by the fundamental changes in Australian secular society that have taken place since the 1960s (Dixon 2004; Rymarz 2004). Gen X were raised in a society impacted by the 1970s economic crisis, growing immigration, the threat of global nuclear war and the AIDS epidemic (Possamai 2009). Their identities have been fuelled by the technological revolution, which makes it possible to construct an identity from a diverse and endless supply of consumerism, popular culture and knowledge. Relentless social, cultural and economic change during their lifetime has meant society, as Gen X Catholics know it, has been constantly reinventing itself. Without an all-encompassing Catholic formation and with parents who sought not to impose beliefs and ritual practices, the pressure to belong is not as important for Gen X as for previous generations. Personal authority and individual experiences have become a central source of meaning and identity formation (Beaudoin 1998; Rose, Hughes and Bouma 2014; Wuthnow 2007).

Gen X feminist consciousness

Gen X women have been affected by the substantial changes in expectations around women's role in Australian society in late modernity. For instance, in Australia, women's material rights and inclusion in the paid workforce (at all

levels) are well established (ABS 2021; WGEA 2022). When compared with earlier generations of women, Gen X have secured considerable gains in their health, education, welfare and financial independence. Improvements in access to quality childcare, superannuation and reproductive and sexual health services have provided Gen X women in Australia with greater choice and agency in life decision-making (Cuervo, Wyn and Crofts 2012; Gibson 2003). A significant proportion of Gen X Catholic women are in the paid labour force, are highly educated and are employed in leadership and professional roles in both secular and Catholic organizations (Dixon et al. 2017; NCPR 2023). However, despite progress in women's workforce participation and education, a debate has emerged over whether 'feminism' and the task of gender equality is 'complete', 'unfinished' or just no longer 'relevant' in Australia.

Paradoxically, the very success of feminist movements, that has opened a diversity of life choices for women since the 1960s, has interacted with gender, race and class issues to make feminist discourses from previous generations unconvincing for many Gen X women (Bulbeck 2010; Summers 1993). Having grown up in an era with a very different sociopolitical context than the preceding generation of feminists, Gen X have experienced a world where the resonance of protest has been replaced with an individualist rhetoric of neoliberalism (Robinson 2007/8). Neoliberalism assumes women are free and choiceful, with failure situated 'in the self, rather than understanding inequalities emerging from social structures' (Evans 2023: 2). Accordingly, Gen X women champion a different, more individualistic allegiance to issues related to socio-economic and cultural structures where personal experiences are the key. While this has been articulated by some as a 'backlash' against feminism, it can be argued that it is really a more nuanced and complex interaction as it involves feminist ideals being concurrently 'articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed' (Gill 2008: 442). Rosalind Gill has developed the notion of *postfeminist sensibility* to respond to and name this shift towards the repetitive emphasis upon cultivating dispositions which assist women on thriving in neoliberal societies, such as empowerment, choice and autonomy, alongside the contradictory but simultaneous focus on women's bodies as their source of value (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020; Gill 2017).

In Australia, research on patterns of participation in education and in the workforce show that, for Gen X women, traditional gender roles have been sustained despite greater equality in education and increased rates of participation in the labour market (Cuervo, Wyn and Crofts 2012). Catherine Rottenberg (2014) uses the term *neoliberal feminism* to interrogate the re-traditionalization

of gender roles under the hegemony of neoliberalism. Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism, with its notion of aspirational agency and apparent work-life balance, has assisted in rendering 'feminism palatable and legitimate, which has, in turn, facilitated feminism's widespread diffusion, embrace and circulation' (Rottenberg, in Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020: 8). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) uses the term *popular feminism* to theorize the commodification of neoliberal feminism as articulated in hashtag activism, social media, advertising campaigns and the branding of feminist products in popular culture and media.

Through the public visibility of popular feminism, postfeminist sensibility with its individualism and transformative subjectivity and neoliberal feminism with an accompanying ideal of happy work-life balance as progressive womanhood have revitalized feminist discourses. This integration of feminism and feminist ideals into the mainstream has driven discussion and activism around feminist issues, both centralizing and repudiating women's rights in the neoliberal state. As a result, Gen X women are engaging with diverse feminist theories, standpoints and *praxis*. What this means and how it influences individual women's views and experiences varies considerably. Postfeminist, neoliberalist and popular feminisms draw on and feed off one another as contrasting discourses. They juxtapose with outmoded, kyriarchal notions of femininity and rigid, binary understandings of gender in Catholicism to challenge, produce and undermine the agency of contemporary Catholic women.

The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II)

The situation of Gen X women in the Catholic Church can be traced back to two major processes of social and cultural change that began in the 1960s, namely, the rise of modern feminism in the form of the women's movement and Vatican II. Both triggered a trajectory of hope for substantial social change for the position of women in the Catholic Church and society. Together, they have the potential to be highly significant in the construction of Gen X women's identities.

The papacy of John XXIII and the opening of Vatican II mark the beginning of a transformation in how women experience and encounter Catholicism and perceive their role in the Catholic Church. In 1963, the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*) acknowledged women's increasing awareness of their inherent dignity and their demand for rights and responsibilities in both domestic and public life (PT: 41). A further historic moment occurred in 1964, when twenty-three women were admitted to Vatican II as auditors

and participants in theological commissions (Goldie 1998; O'Malley 2010). Combined with advances that were taking place for women in secular society, these events raised women's expectations regarding the opportunities the council could bring for Catholic women (Hinsdale 2015, 2016).

The documents that were published by Vatican II, however, say little about the status of women as a discrete group within the Catholic Church (Faggioli 2012; Luckman 2006). The role of women in Church and society was not one of the explicit themes of the council, and there was no clear agenda to address issues regarding women. Massimo Faggioli observes that 'the council fathers did not express interest in a gender-neutral theological language, and Vatican II as an event had as its main characters only male members of the clergy' (Faggioli 2012: 896). Rosemary Goldie, in describing her appointment as an auditor at Vatican II, notes, 'All the auditors, both men and women, were well aware of the symbolic nature of their participation' (Goldie 1998: 71).

Many statements in the council's documents, however, have implications for women and have been used to provide support for a rethinking of the role of women in ministry and leadership within the Catholic Church. The restoration of the biblical notion of 'the people of God' as an ecclesial vision for ministry in *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*) placed renewed emphasis on baptism and confirmation as commissioning sacraments signalling a major shift in the understanding of church (LG: 10). Prior to Vatican II, in Catholicism, the laity, and therefore women, were perceived to play no active role in the life or mystery of the Church. The shift in teaching ratified the contribution of the laity to ministry and the Church and recommended that the magisterium should engage in dialogue with lay men and women (Sheehan 2000). Moreover, it confirmed that while ordained clergy represent Christ in a unique manner, the laity share 'by virtue of their baptism, in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ' (Luckman 2006: 84).

In addition to *Lumen Gentium* other council documents had implications for women and their role in the Church and society. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) asserted that in and through the sacraments, the Church, as the people of God, is the presence of Jesus Christ (SC: 7). *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) denounced discrimination and declared as follows:

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's

intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are still not being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right to choose a husband freely, to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men. (GS: 29)

Further justice statements in *Gaudium et Spes* advocated for women's rights in the workplace and society and called for the collaboration of women in the Catholic Church (GS: 9, 29, 52, 59).

In the context of the 1960s, and the beginnings of modern feminist and civil rights movements, the affirmation of the dignity of women in council documents seemed to indicate that the Catholic Church was acknowledging society's growing awareness of the issues of racial and sexual inequality (Luckman 2006; Sheehan 2000). The council, however, was male and clerically centred and its documents preserve the orientation of the status and mission of women in the Catholic Church, primarily in relation to men. For example, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* both underline the notion that women are a 'class' separate from men, united by their common nature and vocation (GS: 52, 60; LG: 56–65). Furthermore, in the accounts of the women who attended the council as auditors, there are stories of a different, 'romantic' language being used 'to speak of women – comparing her to flowers, sunlight, etc.' (McEnroy 1996: 139). An auditor at the council, Pilar Bellosillo remarks, 'That imagery has nothing to do with the reality that women live. This kind of language detached from life puts women on a pedestal instead of on the same level as man. By doing so, you demonstrate that in reality you consider a man the human being, not woman' (Bellosillo, cited in McEnroy 1996: 139).

In the years since Vatican II, interpretations of exactly what the renewed understanding of Church in council documents meant for the laity, and particularly women, have resulted in significant debate. Some members of the Catholic Church interpret the teachings that come from the council documents as a directive to make the laity a constitutive part of the Church and its governance (Baum 2011). Others, primarily from the magisterium, argue that Vatican II and the teachings represent continuity with the principles of past councils and are intended to recover the proper authority of the clergy (Benedict XVI 2005). Avery Dulles asserts that at no point did Vatican II or its documents suggest that members of the magisterium 'have any obligation to accept the recommendations of the laity with regard to matters pertaining to the pastoral office. While encouraging cooperation with priests, deacons and laypersons, the council placed the powers of authoritative teaching, sacramental

worship and pastoral government squarely and exclusively in the hands of the hierarchy' (Dulles 2003: 10).

With no clear impetus for radical change, the definitive view of the magisterium is that hierarchical-clerical power structures in Catholicism must be retained. Therefore, even though Vatican II should have instigated significant change for women in Catholicism, alterations to the role of the laity that came from Vatican II have not been fully extended to women.

The situation of women in the Catholic Church

Even though Vatican II did not explicitly address the marginalization of women in the Catholic Church or use the word feminism, the event and its documents instigated a hermeneutic of change that has significantly influenced the mindset and *praxis* of Catholic women. Indeed, Carmel McEnroy, in her research project on the women auditors of the council, observes that 'in keeping with the conciliar spirit, the women of Vatican II were convinced that they had turned the corner in terms of being accepted as equal and full church members. There was no going back' (McEnroy 1996: 265–7).

A major development in the trajectory of Vatican II was the development of Catholic feminist theologies and movements. In the years after the council, encouraged by modern feminism and the women's movement, many Catholic women took advantage of ecclesial reforms and undertook theological study, entered ecclesial professions and developed Catholic feminist theologies and movements. Increasingly, women have sought to use the council documents to claim a right to serve in positions of ministerial authority and leadership within the Catholic Church (Faggioli 2012; Ross 2013; Hunt 2023). Catholic women now take part in pastoral and lay ecclesial ministries, and study and teach theologies, making significant contributions to scriptural and theological scholarship (Hinsdale 2017). However, key changes anticipated by women, which would have opened opportunities and eliminated barriers to women's full participation, have not been instated in Church law or catechism (McAleese 2023).

Despite the significant efforts of those advocating for gender equality in Catholicism, church leadership remains insistent that women are already valued in their role 'equal but different' to that of men. This theological anthropology, often referred to as gender complementarity, asserts men and women embody contrasting human natures that correspond to distinct, biblically prescribed social roles and responsibilities. Gender complementarity, which became

prominent in papal teaching during the twentieth century (Case 2016), confirms the equal dignity of men and women yet asserts an essential, binary, ontological difference, which means that humanity is only complete when men and women collaborate equally, using their complementary attributes (Beattie 2006, 2018; Johnson 2002a; Ross 2013). This dualistic model of humanity uses stereotypes to construe characteristics and roles as either innately feminine or masculine. It orientates masculinity with rationality, order and decision-making and femininity or womanliness with receptivity, maternity and nurturing roles (Johnson 2002a). As Ivy Helman upholds, women are 'sexed and gendered down to their souls. Femininity is not just something women do; it is something women are' (Helman 2012: 103).

The secular world view which grants women autonomy and self-expression acts in contrast to the restrictions and limitations levied against women by Church law and official dogmas. For instance, while some gendered roles in the Catholic Church have reformed, the magisterium has remained unwavering in its staunch commitment to an all-male, celibate priesthood. Catholic women remain unable to apply for ordination into the diaconate or priesthood, and, in practice, their participation in ministry and leadership is restricted in many dioceses and parishes (Hunt 2023; WOC 2024; WOW 2024). Readings of biblical texts and historical sources continue to prioritize a male perspective in a way that makes masculinity normative and relegates women and femininity to a secondary order (Hinsdale 2016; Schüssler Fiorenza 2009). A 'conflation of theology with catechesis or the reduction of theology to the repetition of the catechism or of magisterial statements' (Imperatori-Lee 2015: 97) mean female theologian's voices are often silenced or sidelined.¹ Despite the impetus for change brought about by Vatican II and the feminist movements, Catholic doctrine and teachings continue to constrain the involvement of women within the Catholic Church.

Momentum for church reform in Australia

In the post-Vatican II era, theological debate around conciliar hermeneutics has created a divide between women in the Catholic Church. The National Church

¹ In 2011, the US Catholic Conference of Bishops Committee on Doctrine publicly condemned the work of Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic nun and a Professor of Theology at Fordham University. The committee critiqued Johnson's work *Quest for the Living God* (2007) as not being theologically accurate, publicly addressing her using her ecclesiastical title (of Sister) rather than her academic title (Imperatori-Lee 2015).

Life Survey (NCLS), a five-yearly survey of Australian church attenders (Pepper et al. 2018), found that, in 2018, although women outnumber men in Catholic congregations, there was a significant generational decline in women participating in Catholic parishes (McEwan 2018). Yet, while some Catholic women have reduced their church-based participation and adopted a hermeneutic of reform, others have resisted the theological and liturgical changes brought about by the council and adopted a more orthodox set of Catholic traditions and teachings (McKinley and Webber 2012; Rymarz 2022). This small yet highly significant group of women is active and visible in Australian Catholic parishes, finding meaning in Mass attendance, sacramental participation and a strong connection to Catholic culture (McEwan 2018). Tensions between individuals who seek reform and those who find deep joy, value and meaning in the surrender to magisterial authority have arisen as the Church in Australia deals with the clerical sexual abuse crisis, the marriage equality debate and the failure of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia to implement strong reforms. These issues will now be discussed in more detail.

Clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CPCSA)

The crisis of clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CPCSA) has been a defining issue in the Catholic Church since accusations of abuse and cover-ups began to emerge and receive media attention in the 1980s and 1990s. The continuing crisis involves the revelation of numerous cases of sexual abuse of women, children and vulnerable adults, perpetrated by clergy and members of religious institutes, and subsequently covered up by Catholic clerics, lay leaders and the magisterium. Widespread criticisms have centred on both the nature and extent of the abuse and on the historical and contemporary mismanagement of allegations by church leaders (Dixon 2023; Doyle 2017). Findings from the numerous inquiries into CSA across the world have identified the Catholic Church as having significant organizational and cultural problems (The Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse 1922 to 1995 and The Executive Office 2017; RCIRCSA 2017a, 2017b; SCAI n.d.; Te Rōpū Tautoko 2022). High-profile convictions of paedophile priests and revelations about the treatment of women, especially nuns, continue to draw attention to the continued failures of the Catholic Church concerning the safeguarding of women, children and other vulnerable groups (Dixon 2023; Ferguson 2020; Figueroa and Tombs 2022; Haslbeck et al. 2020; McPhillips 2019).

The Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia

Following widespread calls for the reform of governance, management and clerical culture in response to the crisis of clerical sex abuse, the Catholic Church in Australia embarked on the process of its Fifth Plenary Council (2018–22). The Plenary Council process, which included various stages of consultation and dialogue, culminated in two formal gatherings of bishops and other representatives from Australian dioceses and eparchies (ACBC 2019).

In the initial stage of *Listening and Dialogue* a large number of submissions highlighted the lack of inclusion of women in governance and ministerial leadership roles within the Catholic Church (Dantis et al. 2019). Similarly, all but one of six discernment papers written during the second phase of *Listening and Discernment* contained key statements regarding the importance of including women in governance, leadership and decision-making roles, as well as pastoral and liturgical ministry (ACBC 2019). Yet, despite this positive position regarding reform for women, no statements regarding expanding women's role were incorporated into the Plenary Council working document *Continuing the Journey* (2021a) or its *Agenda* (ACBC 2021b).

After the first assembly in 2021 limited reports from inside revealed an appetite for reform related to lay governance and the inclusion of women (Sullivan 2021; Warhurst 2021). The second and final assembly saw 277 delegates gather in Sydney in July 2022. Any likelihood of a greater role for women in the Catholic Church seemed dashed when a deliberative vote on the Motions and Amendments document titled 'Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men' failed to secure the required two-thirds majority support from Australia's bishops (Fawkner 2022). In response to the failed deliberative vote, a spontaneous, silent gathering of sixty of 277 council members took place at the rear of the room during a break following the vote (Bowling 2022; Rodrigues 2022). During the gathering, later characterized as a 'protest', council members expressed a range of emotions including anger, frustration, sadness and disappointment (Fawkner 2022). Church leaders responded and the agenda shifted, and a re-formulated decree on the equal dignity of women and men was voted on and successfully passed (Knott 2022). The revised decree committed the Australian Catholic Church to 'enhancing' the role of women in the Church and addressing assumptions, cultural practices and language contributing to inequality (ACBC 2022). However, as of the present, there is no clear plan as to

how this will be achieved and the situation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia remains unchanged.

LGBTQIA+ rights

The Catholic Church's legitimacy and moral authority in Australia, irretrievably damaged by the scandal of CPCSA, has been further undermined by a divergence in opinion around LGBTQIA+ rights. In 2017, in the lead up to the Australian Government postal vote on marriage equality legislation, the Australian bishops actively campaigned to limit marriage to heterosexual couples for the whole of society on the basis of both moral reasoning and magisterial teachings (Fisher 2016; Perales, Bouma and Campbell 2019). Despite this strong opposition, polling in the lead up to the vote indicated that a majority of Catholic adherents in Australia supported the legislation (Koziol 2017). Of the eligible Australians who expressed their view in the postal survey, a majority (61.6 per cent) indicated that 'the law should be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry' (ABS 2017). Yet, although there have been recent concessions by the magisterium regarding blessings for same-gender couples, the official Catholic Church remains steadfast in its opposition to marriage equality (FS: 31–41).

Issues associated with gender and sexuality, including LGBTQIA+ ministry, were key topics raised during the process of the Australian Church's Fifth Plenary Council. LGBTQIA+ inclusion was a theme in the *Listening and Dialogue* phase, with the final report highlighting the need 'to end the discrimination of LGBTI people' (Dantis et al. 2019: 110). However, by the time the working document *Continuing the Journey* (2021a) had been released the issue had all but disappeared, and the gatherings of the Plenary Council did not generate a respectful discussion regarding the contribution or inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Catholics in the Australian Church (Warhurst and Stephens 2022).

In this chapter, the questions 'What constitutes a Catholic identity?' and 'Who has the authority to determine if a Catholic identity is genuine?' guided analysis. I argued that Catholic women are both products and acting subjects of Catholicism with identities and agency constructed and performed simultaneously from a negotiation of cultural understandings, individual experiences and institutional authority. In an analysis of key literature, I located and synthesized the significant discourses that have impacted Gen X women. I contended that in secular society, women have gained access to material rights and services in reproductive and sexual health, which have increased their choice

and agency in life decision-making. By contrast, I proposed that as subjects of official Catholicism, Catholic women are negatively impacted by Church law and kyriarchal teachings that diminish women's value. Moreover, I argued that the magisterium's steadfast opposition to hermeneutic reform since Vatican II, its lack of acknowledgement of LGBTQIA+ and other gendered rights and the scandal of the CSA undermine Catholicism's legitimacy and moral authority. The result is a growing incongruence between the convictions of official Catholicism and the secular lives of Catholic women in Australia.

Magisterial ecclesiology: Virgin, bride, mother

Chapter 2 provided an exploration of Vatican II as a possible vehicle for reform. Building on this analysis, this chapter will examine the use of feminine imagery in post-conciliar magisterial ecclesiology. Central to official ecclesial discourse in the post-Vatican II era is the understanding that the Catholic Church is the active presence of the triune God in union with humanity in a community of faith and justice. Since Vatican II, however, magisterial ecclesiology has increasingly employed Mary, the mother of Jesus, as ultimate personification of the Church, utilizing idealized feminine imagery to deliver insights and reflections on the vocation and dignity of women and the Church (Helman 2012; MD; Ross 2013).

In this chapter, I argue that since Vatican II magisterial ecclesiology and the use of Mariology¹ in Catholicism have constructed a hegemonic ecclesial imaginary that has the potential to limit agency and opportunity for Catholic women. Feminist theologies note the ability of kyriarchal imagery and symbolism in Catholic discourse to shape women's identities and act as structures of power, marginalization and exclusion. Accordingly, I use the analytic categories of intersectionality and kyriarchy as theoretical spaces to critically analyse and contest fixed, essentialist identity positions and conceptions in Catholicism.

The Marian mystery of Church

The principal document of Vatican II on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), affirms the ecclesial understanding of the Church as a people of God, a spirit-filled community, acting and united with the triune God as an instrument of salvation for all humanity. Beginning with a description

¹ The theological exposition of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

of the purpose of the Church, it states that ‘since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission’ (LG: 1).

This initial statement confirms the Catholic Church as a mystery or sacrament, an arcane reality wherein the presence of the triune God is hidden yet active (McBrien 2009; Paul VI 1963). Then, reinstating the biblical notion of ‘the people of God’ as a vision for ecclesial ministry, *Lumen Gentium* declares that all the baptized, not just clergy ‘by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood’ (LG: 10). Furthermore, it recognizes and professes that, in and through Jesus Christ, ‘the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief’ (LG: 12), thus upholding that laity and clergy, united by baptism, share in the priestly and prophetic functions of Christ (Luckman 2006). As previously discussed in Chapter 2, this ecclesiology had the potential to transform the status and vocation of women in Catholicism. The final chapter (Chapter 8) of *Lumen Gentium*, however, uses Mariology to describe the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus – as mother, virgin and bride – in the mystery of the Church (LG: 63–4). Magisterial interpretations of these paragraphs have halted progress towards women’s full equality in Catholicism.

There has been some debate over the meaning and placement of Mariology in a document on the nature of Church. Some scholars suggest it can be seen as supporting the primary pastoral intent of Vatican II (Lledo Gomez 2015) or emphasizing Mary’s role as a model of discipleship while, at the same time, discouraging excessive Marian veneration (Lennan 2010). By contrast, Joseph Ratzinger (1988) (later Pope Benedict XVI) contends that the text on Mary, which underscores her veneration as Church, was written as a deliberate parallel to the earlier chapters in *Lumen Gentium* on the structure of the Church. Ratzinger purports, that by unifying Mariology with ecclesiology, the authors of *Lumen Gentium* act against understanding the Church through a masculine, structuralist ecclesiology that denatures Church to a ‘mere program of action’ (Ratzinger 1988: 73). He argues that a feminine ecclesiology, with Mary at its core, elevates the status of the feminine, revealing the Church not as a structure but incarnation of God’s plan for humanity (Ratzinger 1988). Herein, Ratzinger asserts, the unification of Mariology with ecclesiology in the text of *Lumen Gentium* is central to the mystery of the Church.

Also known as the ‘Marian principle’ or ‘Marian mystery’, the official role of Mary in the Catholic Church establishes the feminine Church (*Ecclesia*), not as a society formed by human choice but rather by a living Marian mystery of maternity and bridal love bound, in duality, with the masculine Christ. In the Marian mystery of the Catholic Church, the feminine designations – mother, virgin and bride – are more than just metaphors for church. They underline the post-conciliar ecclesial imaginary and assert a fundamental feminine understanding of the Church’s essence, directly linking the enactment of gender roles and responsibilities to the salvation of humanity (MD: 22). The notion of Mary as the mystery of the Church being central to ecclesiology has its origins in the symbolic marriage motif of the Hebrew scriptures where the covenantal love between Yahweh and his people is described as the love between bride and bridegroom (e.g. Isa. 54.5-6; Hos. 2.16-20). Cristina Lledo Gomez elucidates:

The parallels are clear between the image of Zion/ Jerusalem city as a woman and the Christian vision of the church as mother, queen, bride, or other female figure, even if there are no direct scriptural links between the two. The female Zion as its people, their history, the dwelling place of God, and Zion’s future, the place of salvation, can be viewed as paralleling the female church as its people, their history, a place to worship God, and the locus of salvation. (Lledo Gomez 2018: 12)

In the Marian Church, the spousal relationship between Christ as bridegroom and Mary as his Church and bride is viewed by the magisterium as essential in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity (Francis 2023; MD: 24; Ratzinger 1980). Herein, the spousal love between humanity and God finds its fulfilment and ‘deepest source in Christ, who is the bridegroom of the Church, his bride’ (II: 25). For the redemption of humanity, members of the feminine Church are called to respond, as bride, to the spousal love of the bridegroom, Christ (II: 25).

The distinct protagonists, the bride and bridegroom, inscribe cultural-religious gender assumptions and make the hierarchical-clerical ordering of Church central to the salvation of all humanity, but especially women. The womanly and bridal essence of the Marian Church is exemplified in Mary as the virginal bride who is both Mother of God and Church (LG: 63–4). In her maternity and receptivity, the ecclesial imaginary centres on Mary as Church guiding humankind to its definitive and transcendent destiny, giving life direction, and instructing and nurturing humanity to follow the right path (Francis 2013, 2023; LG: 63–4; LW: 9–11). Like Mary, humanity reaches their final goal by fidelity to his or her own vocation as a specific part of God’s plan

(LG: 63–4; LW: 9–11). For women, this vocation is characterized by Mary as ‘handmaid’, who serves humanity in affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood (MD: 5, 9–11). This gendered soteriology of an ecclesiology centred on the Marian mystery of the Church forms the basis of magisterial constructions of womanhood and femininity in contemporary Catholicism.

Magisterial ecclesiology

In the decades after Vatican II, instead of promoting the full equality of women as baptized human persons, the magisterium has drawn on the Marian mystery of the Church to construct an ecclesiology that uses medieval interpretations of anthropology and human biology to preserve the myth of gender complementarity and limit the role and agency of women in Catholicism. Despite some promising beginnings early in the papacy of Paul VI (1963–78), the 1976 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores (On the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood)* pronounced that the female body lacks sacramental significance. The decree prevents women from being called to the sacrament of holy orders by declaring only men can image Christ, represent the bridegroom and undertake Christ’s apostolic ministry (II: 5).

During the papacy of John Paul II (1978–2005) a whole new vocabulary and theology was constructed that defined a positive role for women in the Church while at the same time justified the exclusion of women from ordination to diaconate and priesthood. In his 1988 papal encyclical *Mulierius Digniatem (The Dignity of Women)*, Pope John Paul II claims that women, because of their biological capacity for motherhood, best exemplify the femininity of the Church through ‘feminine’ expressions known as the ‘genius of woman’ (MD: 30–1). Herein, Pope John Paul II locates sexual difference as anthropological, not arbitrary, revealed in the order of creation and of grace, asserting ‘it is a relationship willed by God both in the mystery of creation and in the mystery of redemption’ (MD: 26). Derived from this teaching ‘feminine genius theology’ utilizes the notion of gender complementarity to claim that with womanhood comes the gift of ‘femininity’ or certain qualities that represent women’s ‘true nature’. Advocates of feminine genius theology contend women achieve and live out their ‘true value’ by embodying certain qualities, which include receptivity, sensitivity, generosity and physical and spiritual maternity (Beattie 2006; Schüssler Fiorenza 2016).

In a series of weekly audiences between September 1979 and November 1984, Pope John Paul II reflected on the corporal and spiritual significance of the human body, including sexual differences. The resulting theology of sexuality, gender and relationship is popularly known as the Theology of the Body (John Paul II 2005). In this particular application of gender complementarity, man and woman are characterized in their duality and orientation to each other, with humanity only complete when men and women live out their reciprocity in binary opposition to one another in society and heterosexual marriage.

In his pronouncements as pope and head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI reiterates the theology of ‘the genius of woman’. He affirms that Mary’s feminine dispositions of ‘listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting’ are traits essential to the role of the Church in society, with women living these characteristics ‘with particular intensity and naturalness ... showing the true face of the Church’ (Ratzinger 2004). Herein, Pope Benedict XVI claims the duality of man and woman, alongside woman’s subjugation, is central to the order of creation and Church (Benedict XVI 2008; Ratzinger 2004). Thus, he claims any assertion of equality between men and women must give recognition to ‘the difference and reciprocity between the sexes’ (Ratzinger 2004). Even though statements during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI might appeal to those seeking a more authoritarian, fundamentalist style of Catholicism, their account of women’s subordination as being essential to their humanity is highly problematic.

The theology and ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

The theology of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar rose to prominence during the papacy of John Paul II and continues to appear in magisterial teachings on sex and gender propagated during the papacies of Benedict XVI and Francis (Benedict XVI 2008; CCC: 773; Francis 2013, 2023; Imperatori-Lee 2015; MD: 27). Balthasar’s writings situate the God-world relationship and ecclesiology in sexual difference and the metaphor of nuptiality (Vasko 2014). In his major work *Theo-Drama* (1992), Balthasar asserts that an unequal, gendered male-female polarity that exists transcendentally in God is a fundamental feature of human nature. He argues that the male-female binary functions in such a way that if God’s word *logos* became man in Christ Jesus, two things must follow. First, if Christ ‘the One who comes forth from the Father is designated, as a human being he must be a man if his mission is to represent the Origin, the

Father, in the world' (Balthasar 1992: 284). Second, that just as the first Adam is incomplete without Eve (Gen. 2–3), the woman who came forth from his side, the second Adam, the incarnate Christ Jesus, is 'incomplete without the woman from his side' (Balthasar 1992: 283). This woman – who is both Mary and the feminine Church – is designed to complement the man, Jesus Christ, as his bride. The nuptial metaphor and Christ–Mary relationship provides what Balthasar (1992) purports is the starting point of woman's 'nature' and 'task'. Woman, as the bride of Christ, exists not on her own; rather, she finds the purpose and essence of her existence in her secondary relativity to man as bride, spouse and mother (Balthasar 1992).

Developing his anthropology of sexual difference and metaphorical use of nuptiality, Balthasar (1980, 1992) uses the theological significance of the Christ–Mary relationship to theorize a hierarchical-clerical model of Church, which remains prominent in papal teaching (see Francis 2023). Herein, the maternity and virginity of Mary are central to and inseparably united because, in her nuptial union with Christ, Mary as Church lives only for Christ and is therefore able to respond to God's grace with virginal and maternal fruitfulness for the redemption of humankind (Balthasar 1980). Within Balthasar's soteriology Mary is much more than a symbol of Christian holiness; she plays a critical role in the restoration and fulfilment of the covenant between God and creation. Elisabeth Vasko explains that 'Mary's virginal receptivity recapitulates creation's response (feminine) to the divine offer of self-gift (masculine). Throughout all of history, Mary, as the second Eve, stands in solidarity with humanity and responds obediently in our place' (Vasko 2014: 514–15).

Balthasar's statements not only deny women access to ecclesial office but also name women as submissive receptors of male-created knowledge and power. In his ecclesial vision, Balthasar uses the terms the 'Marian' and the 'Petrine' Church to differentiate between the 'subjective' experiential faith of women and the feminine laity and the 'objective' institutionalized faith of male clerical Catholicism (O'Connell 2008/9). Balthasar pronounces that the Petrine or masculine dimension of Church are the 'more active and fruitful members' (Balthasar 1980: 135), representing the 'true giver, the Lord' (Balthasar 1980: 40). In comparison, he locates the Marian Church, women and the feminine laity at the other 'end of the spectrum ... who passively content themselves with receiving the Church's treasures of grace and knowing that they have God and the Church to thank for them' (Balthasar 1980: 135). Only the clerical office, the masculine Petrine component of the Church, is generative, and women and the feminine laity who make up the Marian component are receptive (Balthasar 1989). The

functions of the Church belong in the capacity of the feminine Marian Church to generate or give new life. Femininity is not dominance or comprehension, as that belongs to the Petrine office of the Church; rather, the surrender of the laity and women is 'of humble and hand maidenly following and service' (Balthasar 1989: 165). In this motif, only the Petrine Church can give 'seed' to new life within the Church, and only men have agency and control over the female body of the Church (Balthasar 1989). The Church as the feminine bride of Christ is not an embodied woman; as a virgin receiver of man's seed, she has no agency.

The ecclesial vision of Balthasar is highly problematic, particularly in light of its visibility and influence in magisterial theology and the post-conciliar, papal ecclesial imaginary, including Pope John Paul II's nuptial ecclesiology and *Theology of the Body* (Beattie 2006; Thatcher 2020), the scholarship and pronouncements of Pope Benedict XVI (Benedict XVI 2008; Thatcher 2020; Ratzinger 1988, 2004) and the statements of Pope Francis regarding women's role in Catholicism (Francis 2013, 2019a, 2019b, 2023; Thatcher 2020). However, of even more concern are the underlying misogyny and images of sexual violence in Balthasar's theology and ecclesiology (Beattie 2006). For example, in *Heart of the World* (1979), Balthasar writes in the first person, creating a 'poetic' description of the consummation of nuptial love between Christ, as bridegroom, and his Church, the bride. He writes the following:

Just as you, passionately, with throbbing pulse, cross over temptation's boundary, so, too, have I crossed over the boundary of the flesh with a quivering heart, fully conscious of the danger. I dared to enter the body of my Church, the deadly body which you are ... For your sake I became weak, since I could experience your being only in weakness. No wonder you realized your advantage over me and took my nakedness by storm! But I have defeated you through weakness and my Spirit has overpowered my unruly and recalcitrant flesh. (Never has woman made more desperate resistance!) In order to put a seal on my victory and exploit my triumph, I have engraved a mark upon you, O my flesh: on your carnal weakness I have engraved the mark of my own carnal weakness, and on your sin the mark of my love ... Empty yourself out into me so completely that I can fill you with myself ... You will experience how greatly servitude follows the coercion of love. (Balthasar 1979, n.p.)

Balthasar's use of vivid and erotic imagery, including rape analogy, and his uncritical reception by the magisterium are disturbing, particularly when contextualized with the prevalence of gender-based sexual violence in society (WHO 2021) and Catholic contexts (Haslbeck et al. 2020; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a).

Pope Francis: A new vision for the Church?

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio began his papacy as Pope Francis in 2013, he refreshed hope for a less patriarchal and more inclusive Church for women. Early in his pontificate, however, Pope Francis expressed a need for the magisterium to recognize the ‘feminine genius’ in decision-making and develop a profound theology of womanhood. In separating women as a special group in the Catholic Church, and in one instance describing them as ‘icing on the cake’ (Francis 2014), Pope Francis iterates the normativity of men and a theology of womanhood abstracted from the lived experiences of women. In an interview with Anthony Spadaro, he said,

It is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church. I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of ‘female machismo’, because a woman has a different make-up than a man. But what I hear about the role of women is often inspired by an ideology of machismo. Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, a woman, is more important than the bishops. I say this because we must not confuse the function with the dignity. We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church. The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions. The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church. (Francis, cited in Spadaro 2013)

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis used the language of Pope John Paul II to describe the Church as feminine, embracing everything involving motherhood, and called for women to use their ‘feminine genius’ (EG: 104). More recently, in an impromptu reflection, he noted that few women were present and highlighted the importance of the ‘feminine’ in theological reflection, asking the International Theological Commission to consider ‘the Church as woman, the Church as a bride.’ (Francis 2023). The statements of Pope Francis encourage church leaders to create opportunities for a greater role for women in theological discussions. However, in referring to ‘feminine genius’ and the Church as woman and bride, he advocates for a continued focus on an abstract account of womanhood and a continuation of the male clerical order and the subordination of women.

Moreover, while Pope Francis' stance on issues related to gender and sexuality articulate a pastoral approach, they do not signal a shift in the Church's positionality on women and LGBTQIA+ rights. His decisions, for example, to modify Church law to give women official access to the ministries of lector, acolyte² and catechist,³ allow pastoral blessings for LGBTQIA+ Catholics,⁴ and permit women and lay members to participate and vote in a synod of bishops indicate a willingness to listen. Yet he continues to take up the language of gender complementarity used by Pope John Paul II and exhorts the Marian and Petrine separation championed by Balthasar (Francis 2016b, 2019a, 2019b, 2023). Further, his use of an offensive homophobic slur when speaking with bishops about the admittance of gay men into seminaries (Giuffrida 2024b) and his strong criticisms of gender theory as an 'ugly ideology' (Francis 2024) that does not recognize the 'order of creation' (Francis, cited in McElwee 2015) are highly problematic in the broader discourse of gender rights.

The ecclesiology of *Laudato Si'*

The soteriological vision presented by Pope Francis in his papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* (*on care for our common home*) represents a shift in magisterial ecclesiology and Catholic social thought. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis asserts that 'human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself' (LS: 66), with the mystery of Christ, and therefore the Church, bound to the destiny of creation (LS: 99). All creation is thus linked in 'a sublime communion' (LS: 89), extending a radically relational paradigm of interconnection where neither humanity nor creation can prosper outside their relationship with each other and God (LS: 66–7). This recognizes and acknowledges both the interconnectedness of all creatures and the need to care for the environment in the context of climate crisis. However, any contribution of *Laudato Si'* to an ecclesial vision where women's dignity and equality are embraced and celebrated is limited by Pope Francis' inadequate

² Pope Francis officially modified the ministries of lector and acolyte to include women on 11 January 2021 through the apostolic letter *Spiritus Domini* (SD).

³ Even the role of catechist has been held by women in various informal capacities for many years, it was officially recognized for laypeople, including women, with the motu proprio *Antiquum Ministerium* on 10 May 2021 (AM: 9).

⁴ In March 2021, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* recognizing the possibility of pastoral blessings for same-gender couples (FS: 31–41).

engagement with feminist scholarship and his problematic use of kyriarchal constructs.

In the introductory paragraphs of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reproduces the language of Francis of Assisi when he refers to the earth as 'Sister, Mother Earth' (LS: 1). Herein, nature is represented in the language of gender complementarity as woman; a mother that nourishes and sustains and a vulnerable sister that is 'plundered' and exploited by humanity as 'her lords and masters' (LS: 2). The dualistic gendered imagery and language of the kyriarchal, lord and master model of familiar kinship, set out by Francis of Assisi, and proposed in *Laudato Si'* as a template of care where humanity is 'called to care for all that exist' (LS: 11) is highly problematic.

When Pope Francis uses the language of family, kinship and care in *Laudato Si'*, he speaks of a common home (LS: 17, 53, 61, 164). In Catholicism, the home is the domestic sphere, a place generally associated with women. Women, especially those in developing countries, frequently carry the burden of care for the home and environment and are, in general, more vulnerable to climate change and ecological destruction (Brazal 2021). Constructions of gender in religious organizations and broader society are orientated so that women and the earth are subject to the headship of men (Flores 2018). Across the world, women and girls are subjected to high rates of gender-based violence (WHO 2021). *Laudato Si'* does not critique the kyriarchal home-family model of male headship or the structures and constructs that it imposes in Catholicism. Yet, studies of domestic and family violence have found that perpetrators misuse Christian teachings that claim the headship of men to extend patterns of violence (Baird and Gleeson 2017; Pepper, Powell and McEwan 2021, 2023; Truong et al. 2020). Any possibility of an ecclesiology that supports women depends on challenging the problems of male headship, kyriarchy, and gender subordination that have become normative in both the Catholic tradition and modern societies. Therefore, even though in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis expresses an ecological and theological vision based on a type of relational solidarity, he does not present a viable theological foundation for an ecclesiology that supports women's dignity and equality.

Magisterial Mariology

Discourse about Mary is a significant feature of post-Vatican II magisterial ecclesiology. However, little of the Mary of magisterial Mariology bears any

resemblance to the narrative of the first-century Jewish woman, Miriam of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, that appears in the Christian Scriptures and *Qur'an* of Islam (Johnson 2006). The origins of the Mary of the magisterial ecclesial imaginary and Mariology can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Apocrypha and early patristic authors (Johnson 2006; Warner 2016).

The magisterium declared Mary *theotókos* (the Mother of God) at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) and the *Dei parthénos* (God's perpetual virgin) at the Lateral Synod of 649 CE (Warner 2016). These pronouncements use classical Christology to describe Mary's motherhood and role in the incarnation. A patriarchal interpretation locates Mary's role as a passive receptacle of the divine seed and the virginal human mother of the divine child. Such androcentric gynaecological presuppositions became no longer viable with the discovery of the mammalian ovule by Karl Ernst von Baer in 1827 (Børresen 1983). After the discovery of the ovule, with son and father sharing a common divinity, the focus shifted towards Mary's role in the incarnation. This changed and refocused Mariology towards 'divine Motherhood' and 'salvation gynaecology' (Børresen 1983). Mary's location in salvation history distinguished her as the new Eve at 'the threshold of the new humanity, the mother ... in whom God made a new beginning' (Brown et al. 1978: 256). This typology, which identifies Christ as the new Adam and Mary as the new Eve, serves to extend and transpose androcentric interpretations of the Genesis creation myth into the order of redemption (Beattie 2002). Nuptial symbolism is used in this imagery with a kyriarchal assumption of subordination. Kari Elisabeth Børresen argues as follows: 'Whereas Christ took flesh in the exemplary and normative sex of Adam, Mary represented the secondary, derived sex of Eve. As the redeemer, Christ is the new Adam, while the Church is the new eve, his wife and helpmeet in the work of salvation' (Børresen 1983: 50). Even though such understandings serve to reinforce the receptive, dependent relationship that exists between humanity and God, they also perpetuate kyriarchal theology and ecclesiology where women are subordinate.

Later dogmas announced Mary's Immaculate Conception (exemption from original sin, 1854) and bodily Assumption into heaven (1950), establishing Mary as unique, blessed and working in union with her son (CCC: 491, 966). The dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception in magisterial teaching confirms that Mary was set apart in human history and was exempt from original sin (CCC: 390, 491). The dogma of the Assumption depends on and presupposes the Christian equivalence between sin and death. It confirms the purity of Mary in both her virginality and freedom from original sin and consequently ensures

her freedom from the corruption of the grave (Warner 2016). When Mary is assumed 'body and soul into heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things' (LG: 59), she is set further apart from humanity and, in her eschatological glory, becomes fully conformed with God (Johnson 2006). Rather than making Mary a realistic and achievable paradigm for women, magisterial Mariology and the juxtaposition of characteristics attributed to Mary by post-conciliar magisterial ecclesiology result in a measure and model of holiness and femininity that is both unrealistic and unattainable. Yet, despite this, Mary continues to be venerated by contemporary Catholic women in pray, piety and ritual.

Marian devotion

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been honoured and revered throughout Christian history through a multitude of images and metaphors that frequently clash and contradict each other. Despite the complicated and convoluted theologies associated with Mary, Marian devotions continue to be a common form of Catholic piety among Catholic women (McEwan 2018). Popular expressions of Marian devotion include the Rosary (where a string of knots or beads is used to count component prayers), pilgrimages, processions and medals (CCC: 1674). Official Catholicism views such expressions of piety as an extension rather than replacement of the liturgical life of the Church (CCC: 1675).

Despite magisterial attempts to synchronize expressions of piety and constructions of Mary, women continue to invoke her to survive and be sustained in a kyriarchal Catholic Church and society (Calderón Muñoz 2014; Johnson 2006; Malone 2019; Mong 2019; Warner 2016). For instance, for centuries, people around the world have reported appearances of Mary. Known as Marian apparitions, these appearances are complex social and spiritual phenomena which have generated cultural, political and devotional tensions and paradoxes (Warner 2016). Often shaped by social forces in places undergoing radical transformation, Marian apparitions have been interpreted as the direct intervention of Mary in the politics of the present. For example, the reported 1917 appearances of Mary to three Portuguese children in Fatima, Portugal, was interpreted as a call for resistance against communism (Barbato 2021).

In opposition to authoritative magisterial reminders of the peripheral nature of Marian apparitions, people continue to hold events and pilgrimages at apparition sites; the medals, literature and merchandize they generate remain

popular (Malone 2019). For instance, Medjugorje in Bosnia–Herzegovina has attracted millions of pilgrims since reports of apparitions of Mary first began in 1981 (Klimek 2018). Even though the magisterium has not authenticated the initial or ongoing apparitions at Medjugorje and only, in 2019, officially authorized pilgrimages to the site, pilgrims visit, pray and seek healing (Klimek 2018; Menichetti 2019). Since colonization, migrant groups have brought to Australia long traditions associated with Marian celebrations, processions and festivals, involving various Marian images and devotions (Kahl 2017). Several Marian apparitions have been reported in Australia, for example, the appearance of Mary at Yankalilla and Coogee and a weeping statue of Mary at Rockingham (McPhillips 2006). While popular, these Marian appearances have received less attention than overseas apparitions (Kahl 2017; O’Connell 2008/9).

Gendered and sexual paradigms in Mariology and Marian devotion do create serious difficulties for contemporary feminism. In conjunction with the feminine imagery utilized in post-Vatican II magisterial ecclesiology, they can support a dualistic sex-gender framework that regulates and limits opportunity for Catholic women. For instance, some feminist scholars claim that Marian devotions reinforce a theology of womanhood that supports a limited feminine vocation and reduces womanliness to a demure acquiescence of a life of servitude to others (McPhillips 2006; Pope 1985). Yet, women continue to turn to Marian devotion as both a source of comfort and consolation and a way of celebrating, mourning and remembering significant events in their lives. Mary Malone contends, ‘Mary has been present with [women] at birth and death and as a source of encouragement in poverty, hardship and suffering. For most of these people, the theological difficulties of this symbolic elevation of Mary have not been a concern; Mary, the Mother of all has Godlike powers of comfort and help’ (Malone 2019: 145). Although some Mariology can be placed in a context of reactionary Catholicism, which allows the magisterium ‘to derive power and prestige from the myth of Mary’ (O’Connell 2008/9: 71), an alternative reading situates Marian devotion as an ‘inversion and subversion of the status quo’ (O’Connell 2008/9: 71).

In contexts where populations are marginalized, Mariology and Marian devotion have been used as a source of emancipation from oppressive kyriarchal ideologies (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007; Calderón Muñoz 2014). For instance, María Calderón Muñoz found in her study of Catholic women in Quito, Ecuador, that women strongly identified with Mary as role model, protector and mother. Furthermore, they regarded Mary not ‘as an afflicted figure or victim, but instead as a brave and empowered woman’ (Calderón Muñoz 2014: 59).

Calderón Muñoz argues that contrary to magisterial Mariology that emphasizes Mary's obedience and chastity, the women she interviewed have taken ownership of Mary as 'an icon of resistance of male-imposed Catholic rules' (Calderón Muñoz 2014: 59).

Over time, attitudes and teachings around Mary have changed significantly. The material gains women have achieved in secular society, and the momentum for change brought about by Vatican II, have given women a greater awareness of their rights and dignity as human persons. Elizabeth Johnson contends that, as part of this emerging awareness, women are 'interpreting the figure of Mary from the perspective of their own struggle to be independent, strong, lively, and holy' (Johnson 2006: 6). Feminist theologies do celebrate and promote 'the full humanity of the diversity of women' (Johnson 2006: 19). However, Mariology has an underlying sexist construal of gender and its ongoing use by the magisterium and others to legitimize kyriarchal structures and political agendas is problematic. For instance, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (2007) propose that understandings of class, race and culture in magisterial Mariology present difficulties for contemporary feminists who seek to deconstruct kyriarchal clerical presentations of Mary as a poor, young, vulnerable woman of colour. Accordingly, Mariology and Marian pieties do need to be critically deconstructed.

The myth of the perfect mother, virgin and bride

In post-conciliar magisterial ecclesiology, the virginity and motherhood of Mary are inseparably united in the imagery of the Church as virgin, bride and mother. This locates Mary and Catholic womanhood in the replication of an ideal rather than a woman who lives, births and mothers. In his Gospel, Luke shares the nativity story of Jesus (Lk. 2.1-20). Of Mary, the mother of Jesus, he writes, 'And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger' (Lk. 2.7).⁵ Later, readers of Luke are told of the angel of the Lord and the shepherds announcing the birth, but from Mary there is only silence. Luke reports, 'But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lk. 2.19). Some years later, in the Gospel of John, Mary is at the foot of the cross when Jesus places her in the care of 'the disciple whom he loved' (Jn

⁵ Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of Biblica.

19. 26-7). Again, Mary has no spoken words recorded in the episode; 'so we can only imagine her distress and horror at the sight she witnesses' (O'Donnell 2020: 722). Writing about the absence of Mary from her own story, Carol P. Christ asserts, 'Her word never became flesh and dwelt among us. Perhaps no one ever asked her what she was thinking. Perhaps she never heard stories which could give her words for her own experience. Perhaps the man who wrote the gospel narrative could not imagine what it felt like to be in her position' (Christ 1992: 230). Without any account of Mary's own words, over time, her story has been embellished and distorted by kyriarchal metaphors and imagery. In this sense, it might be said that Mariology and the ecclesial vision of the Catholic Church as Mary is abstract and disembodied.

Of all of humanity, only Mary bore the Christ child, their bodies united in a profound and intricate way through pregnancy, birthing and breastfeeding. In magisterial ecclesiology however the intimate union between mother and child is lost; women are unable to act *in persona Christi* (II: 5). As the perfect mother of magisterial tradition, Mary is not a historical reality and flesh and blood woman and mother; rather, she stands for a religious myth that supports clerical power structures and hegemonic control. Mary exemplifies womanhood and motherhood, with the clerical hierarchy representative of masculine Christ and a paternal God (Balthasar 1980, 1992; Francis 2023; John Paul II 2005). These conceptions of ecclesial maternity and priestly paternity are located in parenthood without pregnancy, childbirth or children. Herein, the everyday experiences of humanity have been abandoned and, although the Church is Mother Mary, she is like no other woman.

In the absence of scriptural references to Mary's quotidian experience, her maternity has been concurrently elevated and erased. The model of motherhood that magisterial ecclesiology elucidates fails to recognize the everyday reality of childbirth and motherhood and assumes a model of birthing and being a mother that is unrealistic and unobtainable. Clare Monagle asserts:

Somehow, magically, [Mary] is pure and beatific, untroubled by what has transpired. She has not given birth to pain; she has painlessly given birth to salvation. Obviously, her experience is not typical. The new mother oozes, her body is porous, and it in turn cleaves to the infant and then separates from her. Few things can rigorously be said to be universal. That babies are born from bodies with wombs is one of those few things. And that this process is abject, dangerous, fraught, and very messy is another of those rare universals. And that it takes an enormous amount of utterly necessary life-preserving work to keep those babies alive for the first year of their life is also a transhistorical fact.

Mary is kept outside of this danger, this risk, and this mess. This is some erasure. (Monagle 2020: 10–11)

Ignoring the emotional and physical pain of childbirth can cause lasting harm to women (ABTA 2020). Research has linked the perceived inability to meet parenting expectations with negative mental health outcomes for mothers (Gross and Marcussen 2017). The model of motherhood conveyed in magisterial ecclesiology and Mariology is not only unhelpful but could be harmful to the well-being of Catholic women.

Magisterial teaching assigns Mary with perpetual virginity and instructs that this does not diminish with the birth of Jesus (CCC: 496–500). This doctrine focuses only on Mary's purity and disparages actual women who live embodied sexual lives, menstruate and shed blood in childbirth. The centrality of Mary's sexual purity and availability to humanity's redemption is problematic and potentially detrimental for women, particularly those in situations where they are without sexual agency. The construal of Mary as a subservient virgin and bride legitimates the notion that women's virtue lies in their obedience to the authority of men, be they divine or human (Johnson 2006). Moreover, the magisterial teaching that states that women must place 'themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives' (LW: 12) to 'fulfil their deepest vocation' (LW: 12) increases the risk of harm for women.

The exaltation of disembodied motherhood and sexuality in magisterial ecclesiology and Mariology negates the experiences of women and perpetuates kyriarchal systems of power and oppression in Catholicism, including the misrepresentation of male, clerical authority. Often referred to as *clericalism*, the distortion of clerical authority in Catholicism stems from the theological belief that ordination marks a person as ontologically superior and closer to God (see CCC: 1583). Clericalism serves to construct a patriarchal system of relationships that reinforce dependency, ignorance and underdevelopment between an all-knowing and all-powerful husband-father-cleric and the passive feminine wife-child-laity (Radford Ruether 2005).

The hierarchical order of official Catholicism situates women as equal to men yet not worthy of elevated ecclesiastical roles. When only men can be called to God through the sacrament of holy orders (CCC: 1142), female authority can only be exercised through the performance of essentially feminine roles as virgins, mothers and wives. Herein Marcella Althaus-Reid affirms, 'Theologies are never sexually neutral. The Roman Catholic Church's theology is a heavily sexual theology, obsessed with the regulation and control of sexual performances,

roles and behaviour patterns of people ... gendered roles are not an extra element but a constitutive one of an understanding of being church' (Althaus-Reid 2000: 2-7). Even though biblical texts confirm all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1.26-8; Gal. 3.27-8), magisterial traditions privilege men over women in status and language.

In this chapter, I have explored the use of imagery and language in post-conciliar magisterial ecclesiology. I argued that the magisterium's elevation of Mary in a sexualized ecclesiology establishes hierarchical-clerical power and constructs an ecclesiology that situates the dignity and salvation of women in their compliance to gendered roles and responsibilities that affirm their receptive and subordinate position in Church life. I make the case that although women have reclaimed aspects of Mariology and Marian piety, the gendered and sexual paradigms of virgin, mother and bride continue to create serious difficulties for Catholic women. Indeed, the adoration of disembodied childbirth, motherhood and sexuality, which explicitly links spiritual rewards to kyriarchal gender obligations, means the diversity and reality of women's lives is not celebrated. A feminist framing of women's identities in Catholicism, centred in the reality of embodied experiences, both official and lived, will permit women's narratives, rather than the magisterium's edicts, to be the locus for a theological study of identity and agency.

Theorizing power-knowledge for a feminist study of women in Catholicism

Chapters 2 and 3 have situated Catholic women within an official Catholic Church marred by clericalism and a problematic magisterial ecclesiology, with a growing divide between women's secular lives and religious convictions. The purpose of this chapter is to theorize how Foucauldian theories of truth, power and knowledge explain the formation of subjectivity and how they can be used in a feminist theological study.

French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's conception of how discourses intersect to constitute subjects is central to the relevance of his work for this study of Catholic women's agency and identity. Foucault writes extensively on philosophical questions related to the nature of knowledge. He proposes that individual subjectivities are constituted and produced in a complex network of discursive and embodied forms of power and knowledges (Foucault 1977, 1980, 1983, 2007b). Of particular interest in this chapter is how his theories about the dynamics of discourse around truth, power and knowledge operate in relation to the creation of women as subjects within Catholicism and contemporary society in Australia.

Drawing together Foucault's conceptions of technologies of self and practices of freedom with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this chapter will propose that agency is both enabled and disabled as women perform and negotiate systems of power and knowledge in Catholicism. I argue that the notion of women's identities and agency are constructed from available knowledges brings with it an alternative way of examining how discursive systems within societies and institutions work to both oppress and liberate.

Catholicism as a 'regime of truth'

The relevance of Foucauldian theory to a study of Catholic women is open to question. As discussed in Chapter 1, Foucault never explicitly relies on religion as a specific, fixed term or category. In a 1978 interview, he responded to negative statements about religion, faith and church with the declaration, 'Historically, what exists is the church. Faith, what is that? Religion is a political force' (Foucault 1999: 107). In this pronouncement, Foucault positions his interest in the historical and cultural reality of religion rather than in the actuality of belief or faith (Carrette 2013).

Foucault's engagement with Christianity centres on mapping the discursive power-knowledge relations that shape Christian thought, practice and identity in relation to the ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman world (Foucault 2012). In his work related to Christianity, he addresses how Christian discourse constitutes individuals as subjects. For Foucault, the subject (*le sujet*) here is not merely an alternative word for 'person'. His notion of an individual having subjectivity captures the possibility of being a certain kind of person, contingent on a socio-historical possibility, rather than an essential or universal truth about personhood (Heyes 2014). Discourse, according to Foucault (1980), is therefore the mode in and through which society and institutions categorize and speak about desires, objects and bodies in order to produce subjective truth. This truth, he argues, is not objective but is controlled by 'regimes of truth' or the systematic and political processes and rituals that are used to bind or oblige individuals to a particular system of thought (Foucault 2012).

The idea that Christianity is a 'regime of truth', produced and sustained by the effects of power, can be problematic for Christian theologians. In the Christian scriptures, the truth is God's truth, and Jesus, defined as the 'truth' (Jn 14.6), is deemed to be God's authentic agent.¹ In soteriological terms, there is no access to God except through Jesus, who is not only the guide to salvation but also the primary source of life and truth. Thus, truth comes not through a system of obligation but through God alone (Jas 1.18; Jn 8.31-4).

Foucault's interest is in the rhetorical aspects of Christianity, and his concern focuses on how bodies manifest or resist truth statements. He finds a paradox in how Christianity establishes new forms of relation to self in pursuit of truth, while at the same time claiming the self-evidence of truth in tradition (Foucault 2012).

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In Christianity, Foucault argues, ‘acts of belief, professions of faith, confessions, and confession’ (Foucault 2012: 94) are used not to institute or establish a pure or disembodied truth but to govern, categorize and regulate bodies. Knowledge has both an archaeology and a genealogy and, therefore, what is produced and accepted as truth is power-laden (Foucault 1980, 2010b).

Embodied power and subjectivity

Foucault’s conception of power and truth as forces that permeate and arise throughout the whole of life informs this book’s understanding of the individual and collective subjectivity of women in Catholicism. For Foucault, power is not repressive, a top-down force, rather ‘it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse’ (Foucault 1980: 119). He explains:

Rather than looking for the single form or the central point from which all forms of power derive, either by way of consequence or development, we must begin by letting them operate in their multiplicity, their difference, their specificity, and their reversibility; we must therefore study them as relations of force that intersect, refer to one another, converge, or, on the contrary, come into conflict and strive to negate one another. (Foucault 2003b: 265–6)

The type of power Foucault describes presents as a complex web or mode of interaction, where the boundaries are socially constructed and produced truths. An individual’s subject position is therefore variable and changeable, always open to the dynamics of the coloniality of power expressed in various hegemonic discourses and in everyday life. Power is not just based in a hierarchy of relations but rather is everywhere and comes from everyone. Foucault expounds, ‘Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’ (Foucault 1990a: 94). This suggests that power is omnipresent, with the power relations that impact women located at every level of society, operating both institutionally and individually.

Foucault expounds ‘that power is “always already there”, that one is never “outside” it’ (Foucault 1980: 141). This, he asserts, does not mean that power is oppressive or a ‘trap’, rather power is ‘co-extensive with the social body’ (Foucault 1980: 142). Both interwoven and revealed by body knowledge, power is present for Catholic women in all conditioning relations. Foucault notes, ‘Power produces

knowledge ... Power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault 1977: 27). For Foucault (1977, 1980), power and knowledge interact to generate epistemological possibilities, which in turn produce and reshape discursive power relations. Yet, the dynamics of power and knowledge regulate normative and dominant discourses that determine who can speak and what counts as true (Foucault 1977, 1980). In Catholicism, official theological and ecclesial discourses are set by the magisterium to regulate how knowledge and bodies are produced; they attempt to determine the order of knowledge: who can speak and what holds as valid and true.

Foucault (1980) uses the term *subjugated knowledges* to refer to ideas, values and events as knowledge that has been lost or marginalized either within a dominant, all-encompassing theoretical framework or alternatively by the disdain of intellectuals who regard it as naive, primitive or incomplete. Foucault's point is that even within a process of subjugation an agential subject is being produced. Accordingly, Foucault contends, 'Power must be analysed as something that circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. ... Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power' (Foucault 1980: 98).

Subjugated knowledges emerge in resistance to dominant discourses, positioning individuals as simultaneously exercising and resisting power. As a result, no discourse is inherently oppressive or liberating. Catholicism is therefore a field of struggle that contains possibilities of both oppression and emancipation; the magisterium might exercise a type of sovereign power, but women can make choices about how they engage with magisterial edicts and declarations.

Bio-power and governmentality

In his early work, Foucault characterized power as sovereign; the ancient capacity to 'take life or let live' (Foucault 1990a: 138). This was later replaced in his theoretical work with a new type of power that involved 'the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life' (Foucault 1990a: 40). In

contrast to the negative and repressive nature of sovereign power, this type of force is normalizing and disciplinary. Foucault (2007a) proposes that after the sixteenth century, the question of 'how to govern' had become increasingly important. The need for disciplines or methods to control populations was progressively more central to the project of governing. To explain this, Foucault (2007a) coined the term *governmentality* to mean three things: (1) the ensemble formed by 'institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics' (Foucault 2007a: 108) through which the policing and management of a population is possible; (2) the type of power that is called 'government' that led to the development of certain apparatuses and to the development of knowledge; and (3) the result of the process by which judicial forms of sovereignty or the state manage the population. An *apparatus (dispositif)* is the heterogeneous network of strategies and practices in which the distribution of power and knowledge is located (Foucault 1980). It is a diverse ensemble of 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions that contribute to a diffuse matrix of power relations' (Foucault 1980: 194–5). The origins of governmentality can be found in Foucault's examination of the practice of confession in early Christianity (see Foucault 1999, 2005).

In his rhetorical analysis of early Christianity, Foucault (1999) notes the self-transformation that took place during conversion (*metanoia*), compelled both as a break or upheaval of self and a continuing obligation to reveal self-truth. The requirement to tell the truth about oneself was linked to self-sacrifice and subordination and was made permanent in a series of doctrinal obligations and the practice of confession. Foucault (1983) argues that through these Christian practices of self-relation, a power dynamic develops, which he names *pastoral power*. In the early Christian context, pastoral power is salvation orientated; it is both an offering to God and individualizing; 'it is co extensive and continuous with life; it is linked to the production of the truth – the truth of the individual himself' (Foucault 1983: 214). Foucault (1983) states that the modern state inherits, reproduces and reconceives pastoral power. Herein, salvation takes on new meanings related to assurances of safety and well-being, and political and pastoral power relations are linked in the government of populations. This, Foucault (1983) contends, marks the beginning of the use of *bio-power* or the normalization of society through discipline and regulation. The notions of governmentality, pastoral power and bio-power are key in understanding how women obtain subjectivity in Catholicism.

The production of docile bodies and the monstrous

I contend that, for women, Catholicism is a regime of truth, and the official Catholic Church and its magisterium are an apparatus of governmentality. Bio-power gives account as to how discourses of power, truth and knowledge function to create subjectivity for women in Catholicism through and within a capillary of relations that are both strategic and normative. As a diffused network of relations, bio-power is positioned within, on and through the body as the object and target of power (Foucault 1977). The embodiment of bio-power places the materiality of power in the innate internalization of permanent visibility or exposure. The exemplar of modern bio-power is the panoptical design of a modern prison, where prisoner behaviour and production are controlled, constrained and coerced by a naturalized mechanism of supervision or being constantly watched (Foucault 2010a).

Bio-power is automated and individualized in the combination of two technologies of power or structures of control:

One technique is disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile. And we also have a second technology of power which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass characteristic of a population ... to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium. (Foucault 2003b: 249)

These disciplinary, regulatory and normalizing technologies, which are not mutually exclusive, are the mechanisms by which apparatuses colonize power to regulate individuals, populations and social relations, producing docile bodies, monsters and subjected individuals (Foucault 2003b). Foucault contends that within populations there is a prescriptive *norm* that becomes the 'determination and identification of normal' (Foucault 2007a: 57). He argues,

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. (Foucault 2007a: 57)

The norm facilitates the capacity of bio-power to create within an apparatus normalized, disciplined subjects as docile bodies. Foucault asserts, 'The norm

is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain power is founded and legitimized ... the norm brings with it a principle of both qualification and correction ... it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation' (Foucault 2003a: 50). Foucault (2003a) suggests that the antithesis of normal is *abnormal*. Dianna Taylor proposes,

Whereas the norm establishes what is normal, techniques of normalization function to make normal, and thus to distinguish the normal from the abnormal. They intervene within both individual bodies and populations in order to establish and bring into conformity with particular social norms. This is the case with gender, where subjects are divided into two mutually exclusive groups, the appropriate, pre-determined behaviours of which these subjects are encouraged to perform over and over again. Through such intervention, techniques of normalization perpetuate the power relations the norm founds and legitimizes. (Taylor 2010: 128)

Abnormal individuals or those who sit outside the norm and violate the laws of society, nature or religion are named by Foucault (2003a) as *human monsters*. The monster is a heterogeneous materiality, a technique of bio-power, that despite being discursively constructed as 'monstrous' sits outside and undermines the network of power and knowledges that constructs it. The power and capacity of the 'abnormal' – the 'monster' – lies in its very existence outside the norm. The monster is a magnifying model of the impossible. In its actuality and existence, the monster brings the risk and promise of its existence (Foucault 2003a).

As a regime of governmentality, the Catholic Church and its magisterium prescribe norms through a gendered, regulatory set of doctrines, beliefs and rituals. The enactment of these norms produces docile bodies, monsters and subjected individuals. A process of self-regulation and self-scrutiny monitors what is normal and abnormal and who might be understood as monstrous. This does not mean Catholic adherents, including women, are without power or ensnared. Rather, within a regime of governmentality, regulatory norms set limits and boundaries for self-understanding, which intrinsically reward compliance.

Feminism, the body and Foucault

The analysis of social practices and institutions carried out by Foucault gives attention to the dynamics of embodied power and its subjects. Foucault's analysis of the

human body as the centre of the struggle of power can inform an understanding of how women's identities are both disavowed and sustained by discourse. Scholarship associated with women's bodies and identities is, however, typically associated with feminism. Foucault cannot be considered a feminist; his work is heavily criticized by feminist scholarship for its male standpoint and unapologetic disregard for the subjectivity of the lived, embodied experiences of women.

In his conception of human reality, Foucault describes sexuality as an effect of the interplay between constructed socio-historical and cultural practices and largely ignores sexual difference. In this analysis of gender, Foucault maintains that the sexual body is discursively constructed within and through a regulated matrix of bodily pleasures, exchanges, prohibitions and sanctions (Butler 1996). He explains, 'What I want to make apparent is precisely that the object "sexuality" is in reality an instrument formed a long while ago, and which has constituted a centuries-long apparatus of subjection' (Foucault 1980: 219).

At a fundamental level, the notion of the body and biological difference is central to any feminist analysis. Indeed, feminist theologians have asserted that where the only sanctioned sex has been male, women's inferiority is legitimized by claims to certain kinds of biology (Jordan 1999, 2000; Schüssler Fiorenza 1996, 2016). Foucault occupies an exclusively male standpoint and places sex as a necessary precondition for human intelligibility without considering that masculinity and femininity are not similarly constructed. While most feminists agree that oppression does not derive from bodies or sex in a straightforward way and that there is no such thing as a naturalized or unifying 'female experience', in ignoring a female standpoint, Foucault conveys the understanding that power subjugates equally. Sandra Lee Bartky maintains,

Foucault treats the body as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the 'docile bodies' of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men? ... To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom those disciplines have been imposed. Hence, even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault's critique of power, his analysis as a whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory. (Bartky 1990: 65)

Foucault's deconstruction of gender as a source of difference disrupts feminism's understanding of the subordination of women as a source of power-knowledge.

Many feminists argue that effective resistance to women's subordination and oppression entails assertion of the active agency and therefore subjectivity of women. Dianna Taylor explains, as follows:

Insofar as Foucault views subjectivity as a mode of constituting, understanding, and relating to ourselves that implicates us in normalizing relations of power, he is considered to undermine the necessary vehicle through which positive social transformation may occur. (Taylor 2013: 89)

Foucault's apparent reduction of individual persons to passive or docile bodies is challenging for a feminist analysis as it gives no account of how women might act independently and autonomously despite social, political and institutional constraints. Yet, his proposal that nothing can be simply accepted, even those categories, principles and concepts that appear necessary to making sense of the world, opens possibilities for developing alternate modes of thought and existence. As such, Foucault's scholarship is useful to a feminist analysis.

Feminists have found useful tools in Foucault's deconstruction of discourse. Taylor (2010) draws upon Foucault's conception of bio-power to argue that gender is a normalizing regime, the violation of which by women amounts to a disruption of ostensibly natural female behaviour. In her study, she shows that even when women violate the laws of society, their transgression hinges on their defilement of standards of femininity rather than any legal decree, thus demonstrating the normalizing function of gender. In a study of women and Catholic confessional practices, Elizabeth Jordan (1999, 2000) uses the work of Foucault to conclude that while the technology of Catholic confession sought to produce women 'normalized' to the requisites of the dominant patriarchal culture, it instead stirred in many women an impulse towards positive self-definition and constructive moral development.

Technologies of self

Even though Foucault's later articulations of power relations permit a more dynamic understanding of the production of subjectivities, his scholarship still occupies an exclusively male standpoint and disregards women as ethical exemplars in the texts he draws on. Yet, potential for freedom of choice and self-definition is explored by Foucault in his last four lecture courses delivered at the *Collège de France* and in some of his lectures and interviews from the same period (see Foucault 1983, 1988a, 1991, 1997a, 1997b, 2003a, 2003b, 2005,

2007a, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2021). Interpreted as a whole, these works explore the fundamental problems associated with subjectivity and introduce the possibility that alternative modes of self-constitution, self-understanding and self-relation can be established and undertaken.

In these final works, Foucault reformulated his understanding of how power and resistance operate in the creation of subjectivities and the governance of people.² He pursues what he describes as ‘the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge of themselves’ (Foucault 1988a: 17). Given the failure of modern subjectivity to counter the tendencies for obedience and self-renunciation it inherited from pastoral power, Foucault (1991) explores other methods of self-relation that remove the necessity for sacrifice of self. He contends, as follows, ‘I think that one of the great problems with Western culture has been to find the possibility of founding the hermeneutics of the self not, as was the case in early Christianity, on the sacrifice of the self but, on the contrary, on a positive, on the theoretical and practical, emergence of the self’ (Foucault 1991: 180). Foucault develops the expression *technologies of self* to describe the concept that individual subjectivity or ‘free choice’ is a by-product of both governmentality and a person’s self-reaffirming relationship with power.

The notion of technologies of self as an alternative way of constituting, understanding and relating to oneself positions the actions of women in Catholicism as part of a grid of power and knowledge that allows for self-determination. Foucault argues that in all societies we find technologies of self, which ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality’ (Foucault 1988a: 18). He contends that when analysing the creation of a subject, both technologies of domination and technologies of self and the interaction between these two types of techniques must be taken into account. Thus, when examining the subjectivity of women in Catholicism, the lived experiences and bodily practices of women must be considered alongside the prescriptive discourse of the official Catholic Church and its magisterium. What is required, Foucault asserts, is an account that focuses on ‘the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another overlap processes by which the individual acts on himself. And conversely, the points where the techniques of self are integrated into structures

² The extent to which this later work is a new conception or reformulation of his earlier understanding of power and government is highly contested (Vintges 2012).

of coercion or domination' (Foucault 2007b: 154). Thus, he explains that in modern culture '[governmentality] is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself' (Foucault 2007b: 154).

Foucault uses the term technologies of self to conceptualize and provide a link between the wider discourses and apparatus through which governmentality is achieved and the manner by which individuals shape their self-understanding through practices concerned with developing a concept of self. These practices are 'an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being' (Foucault 1997b: 282).

The practices of self through which women in Catholicism achieve new forms of subjectivity are not random and are not produced in a discursive vacuum; they are both tied to and limited by the wider social-historical moment and the discourses and material practices available. Foucault notes that technologies of self '[are] the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself ... they are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group' (Foucault 1997b: 291). New subjectivities are produced through both the practices of self and discourses that support them. Foucault develops the term: *mode of subjection* to name 'the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself obliged to put it into practice' (Foucault 1990b: 27). Modes of subjection are related to the various processes and patterns of conduct or *moralties* individuals negotiate as they take up different positions in relation to the mechanisms of governmentality. Foucault (1990b) asserts moralities are of two types: code-orientated and ethics-orientated. Code-orientated moralities are 'a quasi-juridical form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or set of laws' (Foucault 1990b: 29). Ethics-orientated moralities are not reducible to law but are associated with an individual's relationship to self in connection to a moral precept or 'mode of being' towards a moral goal (Foucault 1990b). Code-orientated and ethics-orientated moralities intersect with 'at different times, juxtapositions, rivalries and conflicts, and compromises' (Foucault 1990b: 30) establishing capabilities to act and think unexpectedly and beyond any dichotomized notion of identity or agency. Bio-power and practices of self therefore act together as a nexus of knowledge and power to produce a Catholic woman as a subject who lives, acts and interprets in terms of normalization, self-interpretation and self-expression.

Agency in self-determination

From a feminist perspective, the process of technologies of self is an important shift in Foucault's work as it presents a method for analysing the relationship between culture and subjectivity in Catholicism in a way that is not reductive, deterministic or conspiratorial but rather juxtaposes work on the self with a broad appreciation of power. There have been several feminist attempts to use the notion of technologies of self to explain how women caught up in disciplinary and normalizing networks of power-knowledge are able to achieve agency (Evans and Riley 2014; Gill and Organd 2015; McPhillips 2006; Taylor 2013, 2018; Vintges 2012). Agency here, however, does not infer liberation from disciplining and normalizing discourses but instead implies a process of self-knowledge and self-determination facilitated by technologies and practices of self.

Foucault is suspicious of claims of complete or absolute freedom and liberation; he contends 'liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom' (Foucault 1997b: 283–4). Foucault's apparent dismissal of the idea of complete liberation could be problematic for feminism. As a sociopolitical movement and practice, feminism is largely motivated by the vision of a world liberated from dehumanizing domination (see Schüssler Fiorenza 2016). The practice of care of the self is described by Foucault as a sort of conversion of power or 'a way of limiting and controlling power' (Foucault 1997b: 288). The power to constitute oneself ultimately can loosen or tighten the grip of dominant and normalizing discourses of truth and power. For instance, Nancy Fraser (2005) draws on the notion of technologies of self to explain the grip of neoliberal evangelical discourses on women in the United States.

Taylor (2013) argues that Foucault's issue is not with freedom itself but with the tendency of modern cultures to take liberation as the sum total of freedom. She maintains that in an interview in 1980, Foucault identifies three practices which together 'can be seen as comprising freedom in a broad sense' (Taylor 2013: 93). Foucault lists the three practices of freedom as follows: '(1) the refusal to accept as self-evident the things that are proposed to us; (2) the need to analyze and to know, since we can accomplish nothing without reflection and understanding – this the principle of curiosity; and (3) the principle of innovation: to seek out in our reflection those things that have never been thought or imagined' (Foucault 1988b: 1). Foucault's understanding of practising freedom is thus a disruption of prevailing norms and values that, at the same time, encourages alternative modes of thinking and relating with both the self and the wider milieu.

Technologies of Catholicism

The notion of technologies of self provides a framework for theorizing how women can achieve subjectivity and practise freedom within the apparatus of Catholicism. Here I develop the term *technologies of Catholicism* to account for a theoretical space in which women can shape their Catholic identities and *praxis*. Technologies of Catholicism account for the Catholic doctrines, practices, teachings and operations, both lived and prescribed by the magisterium, that women perform and use on their bodies, souls, thoughts and ways of being to produce Catholic identities. In a Foucauldian sense, technologies of Catholicism are both technologies of domination and self and practices of freedom that act together with different modes of subjection to reproduce, disturb and interrupt prevailing norms and values to advance different conceptions of self and identity.

Technologies of Catholicism are located within the wider discourses of subjectivity and are part of a broader cultural context and set of societal influences and practices. Therefore, while the power of the magisterial teachings to compel and constitute women as subjects is an important factor in technologies of Catholicism, Catholic women are not just part of the Catholic Church. Catholic women's subjectivities and identities are formed by the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationhood.

The power to constitute self when using technologies of Catholicism enables individuals to use various modes of subjection to take up new subject positions that resonate with them. However, in the action of asserting subjectivity, women might further engage with technologies and practices of self that themselves constitute new subjectivities. While there is a possibility of freedom, new subjectivities can also inadvertently retain and assert the terms and conditions of the prevailing discursive power structure of the magisterium. Thus, implicitly disobedient self-relations, characterized by refusal, curiosity and innovation, must be exercised to create opportunities for new possibilities and freedoms.

Developing self-reflexivity

The work of feminist philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler is useful in conceptualizing how women might develop self-reflexivity using technologies of self and practices of freedom within the regime of truth and apparatus of Catholicism. In dialogue with Foucault and in response to essentialist

formulations of womanhood, Butler theorizes gendered identity as a social construction. Moving beyond binary constructions of sexuality, Butler (2014, 2015, 2018) contends that rather than there being an original femininity or materiality of the body, the performance of gender identity is an imitation of an 'original', which is in fact an inherently unstable socio-historical and discursive construct. To say biological sex and gender are both socially constructed and enacted, however, is not to say a body is fully constructed or that it is nothing but a construction. Rather, what needs to be understood 'is in what sense and to what extent a body is shaped and endowed with significance by virtue of the historical framework in which it is understood and the historical discourses through which it is formed' (Butler 2015). Critical to Butler's theory are insights drawn from Foucault. However, while Foucault theorizes the opportunity for self-determination within the bounds of available discourses, Butler's work extends agency and reflexivity to alterations of discourse within available power structures.

Applied to the situation of women in Catholicism, what Butler's theory challenges is the pre-discursive nature of fixed and essentialist conceptions of sex or gender identity. There is, for Butler (2014), no material body that is not itself constituted, as gender identity is always an enactment and reproduction of normative discourses. Butler argues, as follows:

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of 'referentiality' is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative. (Butler 2014: 10)

Accordingly, gender identities are performed and socially constructed by speech acts, learned bodily enactments and discursive practices. This undermines the magisterium's notion of gender and sexuality as fixed, ontological and absolute.

Butler (2014) calls *performativity* the reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces materiality. Performativity is a series of 'acts' that reiterate a norm or set of norms, where a norm, understood in a Foucauldian sense, takes hold to the extent that it is cited. Norms are able to compel a citation as they set out standards for what is socially and culturally acceptable. The power of a norm is itself citational, and it is in reiteration that a norm is consolidated. Without reiteration, a norm loses its meaning and status as an identifier. Butler

(2014) uses the term *citationality* to name the repetitive process of performativity through which identity is acquired. Citationality, however, is not the 'act' itself but the power that the assumption of a norm compels, the power of a discourse to produce that to which it refers. Thus, it is not through the magisterium's prescription of gendered and regulatory norms, but in and through the citation and performance of these same norms, that women enact their identities and become gendered subjects of Catholicism.

For Butler (2011), the materialization of gender identities is innately unstable and occurs through a process where sex is both produced and destabilized during reiteration. This is because the norms or laws that regulate gender are never exact but are a parody of the idea of what is conceived 'natural' or 'original'. Butler asserts the following:

Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (Butler 2011: 189)

Parody refers to the repetition of citational practices that are necessary to be understood and, more importantly, recognized as one gender or another. The implication is that the enactments of gendered identities in Catholicism are always in negotiation with culture, power and discourse. Authoritarian discourses, such as those established by the official Catholic Church, however, despite their normative aim, do not always succeed in containing the effects they bring into play. Butler explains that during the reproduction of gendered norms 'some weakness in the norm is revealed, or another set of cultural conventions intervenes to produce confusion or conflict within a field of norms, or, in the midst of an enactment, another desire starts to govern, and forms of resistance develop, something new occurs, not precisely what was planned' (Butler 2018: 31). While the aim of a regulatory discourse in Catholicism is a certain type of gender enactment or performance of identity, an individual's lived reality is not always in compliance or conformity with gendered norms, and enactment can bring about something unforeseen. Thus, performativity is a type

of inadvertent agency that can give rise to the emergence of new subjectivities that are not outside culture, power and discourse but have emerged from their terms and unexpected deviations (Butler 2018).

Gender performativity characterizes not just speech acts and embodied behaviours but also how discourse and institutional power function to affect, constrain and move identities (Butler 2018). The emergence of new subjectivities through the citation of norms brings the potential for new conceptions and understandings of self, which exist outside or challenge prevailing norms of recognition in systems of power and knowledge. While this can bring about agency, it can also mean that some people might struggle for *recognizability*, a situation that threatens the possibility of existing and persisting (Butler 2018). Indeed, the compulsory demand to inhabit certain norms or appear one way and not another can function as a precondition to appearing at all 'embodying the norm or norms by which one gains a recognizable status is a way of ratifying and reproducing certain norms of recognition over others, and so constraining the field of the recognizable' (Butler 2018: 35).

Butler (2018) explains that to question how norms are established and normalized is the beginning of a process of not taking a norm for granted, of querying its origins and enactment, how it came about and at whose expense. For those annihilated or degraded via the norm they are supposed to embody, the struggle of recognizability is an assertion of a right to exist and matter (Butler 2018). The struggle for recognizability opens individuals to the condition of *precarity*. Here, "precarity" designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2018: 33). Precarity is often linked to those who do not live gender norms in intelligible ways. It can be, 'depending on the circumstance, both terrifying and exhilarating' (Butler 2018: 40). Butler's notion of recognizability is important in understanding how and why women engage in and challenge gendered and other norms in Catholicism.

Drawing together Foucault's notion of technologies of self and practices of freedom with Butler's ideas of performativity makes it possible for the agency of women to be reconceptualized as a more complex action than choosing one discourse over another. For instance, when enacting technologies of Catholicism, women are able to both produce and subvert recognizability. Power is not simply imposed. Power produces a subject whose agency is constituted in the process of interacting performatively with the regime of power-knowledge. Through the complex interaction of available discourses, agency and subjectivity are

both produced and subverted. Women's agency is both enabled and disabled as they enact Catholic culture. Through the process of technologies of Catholicism and covertly noncompliant self-relations characterized by refusal, curiosity and innovation come new possibilities and opportunities for self-expression. In taking up a subject position, women can negotiate recognizability and precarity and engage in technologies and practices of self and practices of freedom to not just affirm and reproduce but also subversively parody the norms of Catholic womanhood.

In this chapter, I have examined how Foucault's theories of truth, power and knowledge interact in and explain the formation of subjectivity. I explored how his theories might be used in this feminist theological study of Catholic women to interrogate and deconstruct kyriarchal structures in Catholicism. Drawing on Foucault's notion of technologies of self, I developed the term technologies of Catholicism to describe the theoretical space in which women shape their Catholic identities and *praxis*. I proposed that technologies of Catholicism, together with Butler's theory of performativity, produce a theoretical framework to (1) critique and draw attention to existing norms and values that constitute women's subjectivity in Catholicism; (2) introduce opportunities for participating in and expanding the practice of freedom; and (3) extend women's self-reflexivity and agency to alterations of discourses within Catholicism that challenge conceptions of recognizability. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I produce a feminist theological genealogy of Gen X Catholic women's identities and participation.

Invented identities

In Chapter 4 I drew on Michel Foucault's notion that identities are discursively constructed and performed within a nexus of knowledge and power to contest the unitary definition of Catholic identity set out and controlled by the official Catholic Church and its magisterium. I argued that women who self-classify as Catholic are both products and acting subjects of the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism with identities that are constructed and performed from a matrix of cultural understandings, individual experiences and institutional authority.

Using the methodological principles of genealogy, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present an analysis of data from the thirty-six interviews I conducted with Gen X women who currently or previously self-identified as Catholic. I use interview data to explore the narratives of study participants to produce a genealogy of Gen X women's identities and participation. Vignettes provide short narrative accounts from a selection of study participants as a way of presenting their stories directly alongside the critical analysis. I develop the concept interpretive adjustment and use it in conjunction with technologies of Catholicism to shed light on the diverse ways women are engaging with Catholicism and using different forms of ritual and *praxis* to express their Catholic identities and attain, sustain and subvert recognizability in Catholicism.

Constructing a recognizable Catholic identity

In Chapter 4 I used the scholarship of Foucault to develop the term *technologies of Catholicism*. Technologies of Catholicism are a type of Foucauldian technologies of self. They account for the doctrines, practices, teachings, operations and *praxis* that are both prescribed by the magisterium and form part of women's everyday embodied practices and experiences. Women perform and use technologies

of Catholicism on their bodies, souls and thoughts to bring into being various conceptions of self, agency and identity.

Technologies of Catholicism are linked to governmentality or the way that normative forms of gesture, movement, speech and ritual support and feed into macro and micro power relations that regulate recognizability. For instance, in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, the magisterial expectation that all Catholics will attend Mass on Sundays and other designated days is set out in both catechism and Church law. As a result, in official and expert Catholic narratives, weekly Mass attendance is both a normative practice and a key marker of Catholic identity. A withdrawal from regular Mass attendance is often understood as a step on the path towards disaffiliation (Bullivant 2019).

As explained in Chapter 1 participants were asked to identify with one of three typographic groups to ensure diversity in levels of adherence, practice, affiliation and commitment in the research cohort. Notably, all the women interviewed in this study who self-classify as engaged Catholic women regularly attended Mass. Monica, Lucy, Eleanor, Violet, Bernadette, Prudence, Agatha, Regina and Martha attend Mass weekly or more often, and Elizabeth and Billie attend Mass at least a couple of times a month. Disengaged Gen X women tended to report a higher level of Catholic salience yet self-nominate as disengaged based predominantly on their infrequent Mass attendance. For example, Marline no longer attends Mass but comments of her Catholicism: 'It's at the core of who I am.' Patricia observes,

Understanding going to Mass as any kind of religious obligation is not within my reality ... But there have been occasions where I have gone into a church on my own, usually difficult moments in my life ... I don't know, it's a weird thing. It's like it's a quiet place where you can contemplate ... I do feel like I belong there. I do feel connected to [the Catholic Church] in some way. But I don't sit in there and say prayers to ... a classic Catholic personal God ... it's overwhelmingly a cultural thing.

Nanette explains, 'Personally, I'm barely connecting into [Catholicism] formally, but I still see myself as part of church. I'm still Catholic, I still have an interest, I want to contribute to the discussion.'

Participants who are not attending Mass do use other technologies of Catholicism to readily claim a Catholic identity but do so in a way that acknowledges that they are not quite living up to the normative or ideal magisterial paradigm of participation. For instance, Stella, who attends Mass only at Christmas and Easter yet prays daily defends her decision not to attend

Mass more regularly. ‘You know I still believe in God ... But I just do it privately ... the groundings of my faith are something that is embedded in me from that strong grounding that I was given growing up and I’m quite thankful for that ... I just don’t feel that I need to go to Mass every week.’ Resisting magisterial expectations, Stella asserts, ‘I guess it meets my needs and whether or not the people who think that, you know, that they are the governors of religion, they mightn’t agree, but for me, it satisfies me.’

Obligations related to Mass attendance and other sacramental practices are set out in Catholic teaching and Church law; however, they are not policed by any external human authority. Instead, the norm of Mass attendance is regulated and enforced as a type of bio-power where Catholic women are both controlled and coerced by automated and individualized mechanisms of self-surveillance (Foucault 2010b). Expectations are set up and monitored through a complex process of internal and external socializations, including different modes of subjection. The hermeneutics of Catholic doctrine and the promise of fulfilment and support from an all-loving God can work by constraining women’s possibility and capacity to envision themselves otherwise than culturally required. Both happiness (Ahmed 2010) and shame (Ahmed 2004; Monagle 2020; Ratinen 2019) can act as normalizing technologies shaping individuals’ behaviours, identities, and relationships in accordance with prevailing norms and expectations. For example, a desire for happiness can encourage women to pursue and embody norms of Mass attendance, while also marginalizing those who do not attain standards of happiness. Similarly, shame can shape behaviours and exert pressure on women to conform by generating feelings of embarrassment, guilt or unworthiness. Herein, regular Mass attendance is both a technology of Catholicism and a norm of recognition, attainable and enviable for all Catholic women, who, through agentic compliance and ‘good choices’, can achieve *recognizability* or status as a ‘good Catholic woman’. This does not mean Catholic women are without autonomy or agency, trapped by magisterial norms. Nor does it imply that Catholic women’s agency exists simply in a dichotomization of subordination versus subversion or empowerment versus accommodation.

The materialization of recognizability in Catholicism

Capillaries of power are found in the discursive networks of the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, different modes of subjection and everyday life. Power,

however, is not simply a force that dominates or compels but is instead a series of strategic and productive relations that permeate life. The theory that the materialization of subjectivity and recognizability in Catholicism operates only through the repetitive citation of magisterial obligations and regulatory norms is therefore directly counter to the idea of a Catholic woman existing outside these same obligations and norms. The notion that ‘the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms’ (Butler 2014: xxiii) is named by Butler as the ‘paradox of subjectivation.’ Butler’s ‘paradox of subjectivation’ means that the reiterative performance of a norm operates not only to consolidate a structure of power-knowledge but also provides the means to destabilize it (Mahmood 2012). Thus, recognizability does not precede but is produced through the productive iterability of magisterial obligations, regulatory norms, technologies of Catholicism and everyday life as relations of power and resistance.

The capacity for women who self-classify as Catholic to subvert hegemonic, kyriarchal injunctions, obligations and norms in Catholicism, including Mass attendance, is dependent on an intersection of various complex factors. When Foucault (1980) discusses methodological precautions related to the study of power he asserts that research should centre on the subject rather than the source of power. He contends,

In the very first place, it seemed important to accept that the analysis in question should not concern itself with the regulated and legitimate forms of power in their central locations, with the general mechanisms through which they operate, and the continued effects of these. On the contrary, it should be concerned with power at the extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary ... Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and un-interrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc ... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault 1980: 96–8)

As explored in Chapters 2 and 3, Catholicism has a strong tradition of centralized magisterial authority that discourages individual autonomous authority or identities. Research in Australia and abroad, including this study, shows self-identified Catholics can distance themselves from binding, authoritarian teachings on matters of ritual practice, faith and morals while also retaining a strong sense of Catholic identity (e.g. Abraham 2019; Dillon 2018;

Leming 2007; Macdonald et al. 1999; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a, 2023b).

Interpretive adjustments

Women who self-classify as Catholic are not just part of the Catholic Church. Their subjectivities and identities are formed by intersections of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationhood. Therefore, while the power of the kyriarchal magisterial edicts to compel and constitute recognizability is an important factor, technologies of Catholicism, such as Mass attendance, are not produced in a discursive vacuum. Rather, they are tied to the wider technologies of subjectivity that are discursively available. Catholicism is but one aspect of a Catholic woman's broader cultural and social life. Other discursive systems of power-knowledge, including feminism, secularization and consumerism, present contemporary women with multiple avenues for self-expression. The different modes of subjection whereby women constitute subjectivity can result in women looking beyond doctrinal demands and drawing on other theological and moral narratives, including how they feel about and comprehend their relationship with an all-loving God. Conflicting demands can break down plausibility structures, which means that as women enact magisterial teachings and negotiate technologies of Catholicism, attempting to achieve recognisability, weaknesses can be revealed, and there is the possibility of practising Catholicism in unexpected ways.

Feminist scholars have theorized the different ways that Catholic women use strategies to adjust and adapt hegemonic Catholic teachings and practices and negotiate agency and competing identities. Laura Leming proposes that '*flexible alignment strategies* allow people to position themselves with reference to structural religion in ways that help them negotiate religious identity and other valued identities' (Leming 2007: 87; my emphasis). Michele Dillon (1999, 2018) conceives the term *interpretive autonomy* to be the autonomous interpretive stance adherents adopt concerning teachings on matters of faith and morals in Catholicism. Kochurini Abraham names *tactical bargains* the negotiations of 'women who do not outrightly contest patriarchally defined power dynamics of gender but create their own space for a meaningful negotiation of power in their lives' (Abraham 2019: 173).

I name the rejection, negotiation and resistance of hegemonic Catholic injunctions, teachings and technologies of Catholicism: *interpretive*

Table 2 Examples of Interpretive Adjustments

Interpretive adjustment	Example (used and described by participants)
Replaces masculine language.	Nanette responds spontaneously during the Mass . Luanne changes male pronouns in the Mass to inclusive language.
Blends Catholic prayer with secular practices and other spiritualities.	Kim prays the Rosary in conjunction with Tarot and journaling. Lizbeth works with a Jungian spiritual director to work on her dreams and mindfulness as a form of prayer .
Adapts Catholic ritual.	Elizabeth splashes holy water around her home to eliminate ‘bad juju’ or ‘bad energy’.
Strategically adapts their positioning to navigate spatial power dynamics.	Martha and Bernadette consciously carve out a space for themselves in public ministry .
Are guided by life experience rather than Catholic teachings and doctrine.	Mari, Patricia and Martha reject the Catholic teaching not to use birth control and instead draw on their life experiences.
Reconceptualize Mary as a powerful woman with agency and sexuality.	Bernadette and Marline use storytelling to reconceptualize Mary beyond a virginal archetype.
Adjusting behaviour, speech and attitudes to circumvent harm and suffering.	Monica prays and seeks counsel from priests regarding using assistive reproductive technologies even though she knows it is against Catholic teaching.

adjustments. Interpretive adjustments are hermeneutic techniques, actions and strategies that enable women to position themselves both within and in reference to different modes of subjection within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism. The power to constitute self and create opportunities for new possibilities and freedoms, when using technologies of Catholicism, requires implicitly disobedient or noncompliant self-relations. Interpretive adjustments incorporate actions and strategies of attachment and avoidance, including the devices of flexible alignment, tactical bargains and interpretive autonomy.

Foucault notes that ‘resistance is part of this strategic relationship of which power consists’ (Foucault 1997a: 168), and while power can be stabilized in institutions, there is potential for individuals and social movements to have an impact on the status quo. He identifies various forms of ‘counter-conduct, all

of which tend to redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power in the systems of salvation, obedience, and truth' (Foucault 2007a: 204). Butler also acknowledges that cultural conventions can intervene within a regulatory field of norms to produce confusion or conflict. Butler (2015) asserts that in the process of enactment of regulatory norms, other desires can start to govern, acting as forms of resistance, with a result that is not precisely what was planned.

Interpretive adjustments can empower women to make sense and negotiate their Catholic identities in relation to technologies of Catholicism and magisterial norms that establish recognizability, other valued identities and value systems, including various aspects of intersectionality. Interpretive adjustments can involve strategic attachments and avoidances of particular people, places, language and technologies of Catholicism. I have included descriptions of interpretive adjustments as used by various participants in Table 2.

Nanette

Nanette grew up as part of a large Catholic family. Mass attendance every Sunday was an important part of her upbringing. She says, 'The community was more than just Mass on Sunday.' The nuns who educated Nanette encouraged her to think independently and explore her questions about Catholicism; she characterizes them as 'strong women'. Largely because of their influence, Nanette volunteered and did missionary work in Australia and overseas before training as a teacher.

Nanette now has postgraduate qualifications in theology and works in Catholic education. She is heavily involved in social justice activism and advocacy. Describing prayer as something she dips in and out of, Nanette notes, 'I wouldn't use any formal prayer, even though, I learnt many of them in primary school. They were drilled into us. I don't go back to that ... I respond spontaneously.'

Nanette explains that she gets 'uncomfortable with the masculine terms for God'. She explains that, for her, God is

the divine mystery, the transcendent, the light in the world, something that is close to us but bigger, so much bigger than anything we can imagine. Something ... our language can't really describe. I guess I acknowledge the limitations of our language in trying to describe something that is not of this world, so a force of love ... So, yes, not concrete in any real analogy.

Nanette now feels disconnected from official Catholicism and attends Mass irregularly. She asserts, 'I couldn't go to Mass because I was just overcome in the middle of Eucharistic prayer with a sense of, "Where am I in this"? and a complete despair at that, that I could not see myself in this due to the masculine pronouns and that sort of thing.'

Instead of attending Mass, Nanette finds a sense of belonging in a women's circle that 'come together under a sense of spirituality, simplicity, and contributing to the world'. As her interview draws to a close, Nanette reflects,

Do we stay in and keep fighting? At what point do we go – what point do we just give up and leave them to it, to become this obsolete little group of mainly men and few women and do their thing? ... I sit there, and I'm really challenged by that, and I kind of go, 'How can I continue?' but at the same time, I think my nature of wanting to do the right thing and follow the rules also struggles with me moving out of it ... And, well, it's my Church. So why should I leave?

'Where am I in this?': Negotiating recognizability

Recognizability as a 'good Catholic woman' is produced by the enactment of certain hegemonic, normative technologies of Catholicism prescribed by the magisterium. However, the stability of these normative practices, as with other social and religious norms, is a function of its repeated enactment. Here, agency resides within the iterability of performativity (Butler 2011). That is, agency finds its basis in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that an iteration might not succeed or may be reappropriated or re-signified for purposes other than consolidation of the norm (Mahmood 2012). Interpretive adjustments are one way women interrupt, reappropriate and re-signify hegemonic technologies of Catholicism.

For instance, the reiterative nature of regular Mass attendance is intended to renew, nourish and affirm the efficacy and plausibility of Catholic faith. The magisterium purports that in the Mass adherents encounter and are nourished by Christ in scripture and the Eucharist and thus become 'Church', the mystical living body of Christ in the world (Francis 2017). Josephine, Lucy and Billie maintain a deep spiritual connection with the Mass. Josephine, a weekly attendee, contends, 'I think [the Mass] is central to what we're all doing, and what we believe. It's the centre of my belief.' Billie states, 'I go for downtime; I go

for singing and I go to hear a message to live my life differently or to stay on track in the homily or sermon. I also go for ritual or ceremony. I love that part of Catholic Church.' Lucy reflects,

Seriously in the last few years there have been times where I have really questioned being a member of the Catholic Church. My faith will always be with me ... my faith is about my relationship with God – it is not actually anything to do with the church however there is comfort from the rituals that we are so used to.

For Billie, Josephine, Lucy and other regular Mass attendees in the study cohort, compliance with magisterial norms of recognizability is accompanied by personal and spiritual benefits. The regularity of their Mass attendance is, in part, the fulfilment of a personal obligation to an all-loving God, which strengthens their Catholic faith and in turn increases the likelihood of continued compliance.

When a regulatory norm is enacted over and over again, however, the process of its repetition can open up its own weakness (Butler 2018). The continuous re-enactment of Mass attendance can produce something not necessarily aligned with its aims. Overall, the study cohort reports that the Masses they attend lack relevance and are unengaging or unsatisfying. Some women express a desire for the Mass to be inspiring and applicable to their lives. As Monica purports, 'People just don't see the benefit of going to church – even me. It's not enriching. I think they probably feel they should go to Mass – they don't go – they can't be bothered – they'd rather not think about it.'

Nanette and Luanne speak of their discomfort with masculine language. Layla cites difficulty and discomfort with the most recent changes in the language of the Mass and notes, 'The thought of going to Mass makes me anxious, because it's not what I remember it to be.' Chloe contends the Mass is 'very boring and very rote' and 'just dragged on'. Veronica notes the Mass is 'not dynamic' and suggests many people are 'yearning for something that is appealing'. Miriam states that the Mass is not focused on God and is a 'big production' that lacks meaning with 'sleep more a priority on a Sunday'. She says the following:

If you're not part of [Catholicism] and you walk past a church and they're praying, it does look very complicated, what people are doing. The whole going to Mass and sitting down, standing up, sitting down, kneeling, standing up, sitting down, you know, it's those sorts of practices it's like we're all there to listen that's basically what you're doing, listen and pray, standing up, sitting down, those traditions are just a form of showing respect, but at the same time

... I don't really agree with it, and I don't agree with getting dressed up in all the big robes and things like that ... that's not for me.

Libby, who attends Mass infrequently, best articulates the overall lack of relevance of the Mass for the cohort. She asserts the following:

I find it very frustrating and confronting. So, every now and again I just get the urge to go to Mass, but when I do, then I don't do it again for a long time. It's such an overwhelmingly male environment, such a disempowering environment. Just as a woman and as a member of the laity, I feel like you're there to serve the institutional Church and it's got very little to do with what we were taught about God as a child. It feels like I have no role in that, except in terms of audience participation. I find a lot of what is taught in the sermons to be very frustrating and confronting. I also think some of the power of ceremony has been stripped away. So, it's not as if you're getting anything from the ceremony itself. All of the more modern elements are not engaging and are, in fact, alienating. It still has all the male authority, and it's lost some of the power of ceremony.

Interpretive adjustments formed by speech and language are one method women use to extend their agency while still complying with the magisterial norm for regular Mass attendance. Largely because of the repetitive use of masculine terms for God, Nanette describes herself as 'barely connected' during the Mass. Words matter here, not just symbolically but theologically. For instance, even though God is officially proclaimed in Catholic doctrine as Spirit and beyond male or female personification the hegemonic discourse of 'God-he' is deeply socialized in official Catholicism. The catechism states, 'We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. *He* is neither man nor woman: *he* is God' (CCC: 239; my emphasis). The centrality and constant replication of male language and images of God in magisterial documents, liturgy, preaching, worship and catechesis, however, communicate a different message: 'God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female' (Johnson 2002b: 5). The repetitive use of the designations he, him, Lord and Father suppresses other imagery of the triune God, including God as woman and mother (Gen. 1.27; Deut. 32.11-12, 32.18; Ps 123.2-3, 131.2; Isa. 42.14, 49.15, 66.13; Hos. 11.3-4, 13.8; Mt. 23.37; Lk. 13.34, 15.8-10).

The prioritizing of male pronouns in speech about God in the Mass function with the implication that women are unable to represent God (Marquis 2021). Speech acts are performative and male-centred language acts as regulatory

discourse reinforcing women's and LGBTQIA+ subordination (Butler 2018). Over time, language about God is internalized and becomes an unconscious part of a pervasive system of oppression that normalizes masculinity and marks people who are not men less than worthy. Nanette asks herself 'Where am I in this?' and in order to avoid the painful encounter uses interpretive adjustments to adjust her language to reshape her experience of the Mass. When Nanette ignores the prayers of her childhood and responds spontaneously, she is enacting interpretive adjustments to affirm her equal dignity before God and alter the way she enacts and performs her Catholic identity.

As they tell their stories, several participants recall grappling with the notion of an all-powerful 'God-he'. They recount how they use interpretive adjustments through speech acts to negotiate understandings that they find limiting or marginalizing. In her interview, Luanne explains how she attends Mass as part of her devotion to God. She describes how she takes control of her experience by adapting the words she speaks and says, 'I do get a bit annoyed, sometimes I change it into my own words. A couple of the prayers where they talk about his and his Church. I will say God and God's Church. So, I will use God instead of his and I will sort of make a point of that just to myself.'

Participants tell stories of how the representation of God as personified, all-powerful and male are incompatible with their innate understanding of an all-loving, omnipresent God. Libby asserts,

The idea that the creator would be male, I don't accept that at all. The idea that the being with all the power in the universe is male I don't accept at all. The idea that the only conduit – or the primary conduit – for that being is his only son, again male, I don't accept that ... God to me is more akin to the Holy Spirit. I believe that there is a force of goodness, of creation, of love that exists separately from the interactions of people ... that exists in the universe. That is how I see God, rather than God being an entity. It's a bit like the force in *Star Wars* I guess ... I connect with that quite a lot. I think part of our journey is to try to align ourselves more with that force and tap into that force.

The tension between the normative 'God-he' representation and women's intuitive or spiritual knowing was present in women's narratives. Miriam states,

I don't think God is just a one-person thing. There is a higher being, or there is something more than just us whether it's God or the universe ... I do pray to God ... I just put it out there and you know, think positive thoughts or whatever. I would say [God is] more like an energy force ... a power beyond me.

Patricia contends,

I mean I don't have any belief in a personal god. So, the idea of anyone, you know, up in the sky approving or disapproving of my behaviour, that doesn't exist for me ... I don't know if I would ever really talk about God as something I believe in. I don't know. I mean there are mysteries, I don't discount them. I wouldn't go around calling myself an atheist ... I'm just not really interested, I suppose, in the question of whether or not God exists ... I don't believe that there's a mind out there that resembles our own minds in any way, that's handed us a certain set of rules, that observes our behaviour, that's going to parcel out rewards and punishments. I don't believe in any of that stuff ... I believe I suppose in some sort of an idea of transcendence, some kind of meaning ... grace has some meaning to me, but the idea that there's some kind of authority distributing that grace, I don't believe that.

Bernadette notes, 'I speak to [God] like he's a person, but I know he's not a person. 'He' because that's how it was when I was growing up ... I don't want to say it, but I think it's a bloke ... And I haven't had a good experience with a man being in charge.' Eleanor reflects, 'I think God is a mystery we never fully understand. Part of me thinks that God can be anything because he created everything but part of me thinks he is a father. We can never fully understand as God always is and always was. You know it's hard to get your head around all that.' Eleanor clearly articulates how she finds the representation of God as a man and father in Catholic liturgy and formal prayers conflictive and fraught. She explains, 'And I think if you don't have that love of a father, a paternal father, it's very hard to make the next leap that there is a Heavenly Father that loves you.'

The inability to make sense of the hegemonic expression of God as an all-powerful, personified man can have an impact on how participants take up various technologies of Catholicism. For example, Frances maintains,

I don't believe that there's a God that is looking down controlling my day-to-day life or engaged and able to intervene on an individual basis. I think that possibly there is a spirituality that we don't quite understand as humans, that we haven't grasped. Part of that spirituality, for want of a better term, is an embracing of humanity. So, I might meditate on something you know, if there's been something horrific happening in the world, yes, my mind goes to whatever power there might be to provide whatever relief and support there might be, but nothing beyond that. I don't see a God. I feel there's a spirituality in humanity that we haven't quite we don't understand all the dimensions yet.

When women fail to recognize the ‘God-he’ as expressed in official Catholic liturgies, prayers and rituals, they can take up technologies of Catholicism unsanctioned by the magisterium.

Kim

Kim grew up in rural Australia in a large Catholic family. Multi-generational community involvement in the local Catholic parish was a significant part of her upbringing.

Now, Kim does not attend Mass and hasn’t for years. When I asked about her participation in other sacraments she exclaimed, ‘I always thought Reconciliation¹ a load of hogwash even as a kid I was just like I couldn’t believe a kid could be a sinner.’ Kim, however, prays regularly and describes a blending of Catholic pieties with secular practices and spiritualities. She notes,

I pray all the time. I often say the Rosary ... and there’s never not a connection ... it is definitely informal ... I often meditate I often do tarot cards in the morning. I have this little routine I do tarot cards and I journal; I pray in the evening ... It’s sort of like for me in my daily practice. It’s when there is something that I need support with or that I need help with. It’s just like that’s who I talk to.

When I asked Kim who she is talking to when she prays, she conveys certainty that she is communicating with Christ and his mother Mary. She asserts the following:

I do the Rosary to Mary because I think that I feel more connected with her because she’s a woman and she was a woman on this earth. But it is like Christ over arches all of that ... It is hard to describe it. It is like when I’m at work I’m doing Christ’s work; I’m not doing my work.

Disconnection from the official Catholic Church and regular Mass attendance was gradual for Kim. She describes a trip to Europe and the Vatican, ‘In Rome homeless people were everywhere and it was quite confronting for my kids ... that level of opulence [in the Vatican] and the paintings that they hold and the wealth ... and not twenty metres from their front gate is extreme poverty and that makes no sense to me.’

Asked if there were any key moments when she decided to ‘stay’ or abandon her Catholic identity, she recalls the following:

¹ A sacramental celebration through which a person has their sins forgiven, reconciling them with God and the Church (CCC: 1442).

There were multiple moments that added up. I remember trying to go a service at Christmas or something like that and I remember listening to the priest and whatever he had to say ... And I was just 'oh my God this makes no sense'. How they go about their business makes no sense and the way that a liturgy is run. Then I started experiencing 'the other'. When [my child] was in a preschool and they had a Winter Festival they lit up a spiral and all the kids were sitting quietly on the seats and then they walked the Spiral and then the Spiral lit up. And I was like this is church for me – that other shit that is run by a male is not church. It was just that things started not making sense and it was like, 'Why is he in the robes? Why is he saying these prayers?' ... But now I feel so different and disconnected I can hardly recollect ... I think it was just a series of moments.

For Kim, the official Catholic Church, the Mass and the male clerical hierarchy lack credibility, and when speaking of her 'lineage of faith' she refers to the women in her family. She remembers a type of 'inherent faith' that was expressed in her mother and grandmother as a 'sense of reverence' and the way they 'experience the beauty' of the everyday.

For Kim, God is not a male patriarch but 'encompasses all of it, spirit, Jesus, something beyond me. God oversees all'. Throughout her interview, she conveys a type of cognitive dissonance or inconsistency; Catholicism is her family heritage, but so much of it makes no sense to her. She ends her interview with the following statement: 'I think it's very interesting that I still call myself Catholic. I think I might need to change it, but I don't know what I change it to. How do you get rid of it? Do you have any ideas?'

'I think I might need to change it': Popular pieties

Popular pieties are acts of religiosity and devotion that originate from and are practised by ordinary Catholics. They are technologies of Catholicism and can include private prayer, blessings, scripture reading, acts of devotion and rituals that operate in opposition or in harmony with the Mass and other forms of worship sanctioned by the magisterium. In official Catholicism, women have no role in establishing or adjusting hegemonic magisterial forms of ritual and worship. Popular pieties present opportunities for women to move within and against official and regulatory discourses. For instance, some participants recount how they pray to Saint Mary MacKillop (1842–1909) and ask for her

intercession. Stella recalls how she has a 'strong connection to Mary MacKillop' and organizes a group of family members to pray a novena, or nine-day prayer offering to MacKillop whenever relatives are sick or dying. Emma tells the following story:

My mum took really sick and was in intensive care ... they kept telling me that we wouldn't get her out ... and they kept saying start making plans she's not going to get out of here. I had a bottle of holy water from Lourdes at home my cousin had bought, and I got it out of the cupboard ... and I put it in my handbag and every day I prayed to Mary MacKillop, it was before she became canonized. I would say 'please Mother Mary, please Mary MacKillop, please fix her' and I put holy water on her forehead and on her ear lobes and after nineteen days she came out.

MacKillop is Australia's first saint and the co-founder of an Australian order of women religious – the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Recognized for her humble commitment to social justice and equality in education she was canonized on 17 October 2010 (Farmer 2011). MacKillop is venerated for her 'deep respect for the innate dignity of humanity, and a compassion which heightened her vision of a better life for the poor' (Lewis 2010: 63). However, her tenacity and commitment to self-governance for her order placed her at odds with the clerical authority of her time. Kathleen McPhillips explains,

She insisted on the independence of the order from local clergy and was very much in the public realm. Such work brought her under the scrutiny of the male hierarchy. Their attempts to manage her public visibility, to restrict her movement, and to bring her under local church control indicate just how important gender order was to the development of an Australian state and church. In this she is certainly not unlike other saints, whose function has been partly to provide the laity with forms of folk religion that reflect their own experiences of faith, and partly to provide the Catholic Church with role models of appropriate femininity and masculinity. (McPhillips 2013: 31)

Clerical hostility to MacKillop's reform agenda has also been linked to a cover-up of paedophilia and sexual abuse (Maley 2010). At odds with her social radicalism, MacKillop's major biographies seek to expand her more positive virtues and minimize her interactions that placed her in direct confrontation with established authority and resulted in her excommunication (Gardiner 1998; Hooper 2018). In this way, her biographies function as hagiography with the specific purpose of elevating the cult of Mary MacKillop and producing a saint who is recognizable as

a Catholic feminine subject (Hooper 2018; McPhillips 2013). Yet, her iconoclastic life and opposition to clerical misconduct enable her to be a guide for Catholic women as they seek to find their place in official Catholicism.

When acts of popular piety are characterized by refusal, curiosity and innovation, they can create opportunities for a type of Catholic subjectivity that is not always in harmony with the ideals of the magisterium. For example, Monica recounts attending a healing Mass at a chapel dedicated to MacKillop where she prays for her IVF treatment to work even though she knows it is against Catholic teachings. Ruby keeps a MacKillop bookmark and speaks of her devotion as she recounts her dissatisfaction with the Catholic hierarchy. Luanne recalls travelling to Rome for MacKillop's canonization and reflects that MacKillop is 'a very strong source of inspiration' noting that 'she challenged and when she really felt like she knew that something was right, she stood her ground'.

When popular pieties are enacted in conjunction with interpretive adjustments, they can create moments of discontinuity that both challenge the legitimacy of and transform magisterial norms and practices. Earlier in this chapter, I told the story of Nanette, who uses interpretive adjustments to change language about God as she prays the Mass. As Nanette makes interpretive adjustments, her experiences are altered, and what emerges is a renewed experience of the Mass – a transformed technology of Catholicism. In a similar way, Kim and other study participants use interpretive adjustments as they enact private prayer, scripture reading, acts of devotion and rituals. They transform or bring about new popular pieties that produce Catholic subjectivity in a way relevant to their own lives and situations. For instance, during her interview, Kim explains her doubt and disengagement when the Mass and male-only Catholic priesthood no longer makes sense. As she engages in devotional practices and popular pieties as technologies of Catholicism, Kim uses interpretive adjustments to push at boundaries set by magisterial edicts. Her actions and words challenge the natural inevitability and stability of established magisterial norms. Kim's agency is activated, she is inspired and her Catholic identity materializes in part because of the abandonment and refusal of normative *praxis*. As Kim prays, works, reads her Tarot cards, journals and invokes Jesus and Mary in the everyday, she is engaging with Catholicism, spirituality, magic and the divine. Her prayer and ritual life act with and against official Catholicism and other discourses including consumerism, feminism and neoliberalism, producing confusion and conflict as competing claims of recognizability are negotiated. What emerges are new, altered technologies of Catholicism through which Kim produces her inherent yet transformed Catholic identity.

As the women I interviewed enact and embody technologies of Catholicism including popular pieties in conjunction with interpretive adjustments, new acts of devotion and rituals emerge that involve alternative and potentially opposing conventions. Several participants in this study report praying Catholic formal prayers with adaptations from a blend of Christian denominations, religious traditions and spiritualities. For instance, Eleanor attends Mass weekly, yet also describes using a blend of Catholic prayers, bible reading and an impromptu style of prayer she learned when involved with a Baptist Bible study group and Pentecostal prayer group. She uses these practices to navigate difficult times and strengthen her relationship with God:

You know I would pray every day. I pray in the morning. Before I get out of bed I pray, and I pray regularly at night ... I read the Bible quite a lot ... I started going to a [Baptist] women's bible study ... I was going through a very difficult phase ... they prayed over me, and I had never experienced that before. They all came around me and they put their hands on me, and they all just started praying like they would take turns, and it was just amazing ... it gave me so much peace.

Lucy often sits by herself in a church as a form of prayer:

Sometimes I will just go and sit in the church if I feel the need to. If I'm feeling rattled or just feeling out of sorts ... I will go and sit in the quiet church. It's different from just lying down on my bed or sitting down on my lounge and talking to God ... I don't actually say or think anything – I just sit. And that just... I guess that feels like a prayer.

Lizbeth explains how she regularly meets with a Jungian spiritual director to work on contemplative prayer, her dreams and mindfulness as a form of Catholic practice:

I also practise mindfulness ... What arises from my dreams I try to sit with as a form of prayer. For me prayer, really, is a bringing to consciousness of people I'm holding in my thoughts. So, you know, if I'm thinking particularly about someone ... I hold them in my thoughts and for me that is holding them in the presence of God.

Patricia reflects on her prayer life:

I had a lot of difficulty getting pregnant with my kids ... there was church on my way home, and I used to go in there. But ... I mostly [when I went in the church] I used to just think about my grandmother, the one who's dead ... I haven't said a

prayer in a very long time. I think if I find myself in a church ... I will kind of go into that kind of reflective mode where you're trying to connect with something bigger than yourself.

Elizabeth, when asked about whether she prayed privately, states:

Not a lot, to be honest. Not a lot. Not – certainly not on a daily basis ... I mean, I will say prayers with my daughter at bedtime ... and you know, I've got my holy water, big jugs of it here ... I'll occasionally flick that around when things are getting a little bit tense, and there's a whole lot of 'bad juju' in the house and I'll flash that shit around.

Elizabeth's reference to 'bad juju' – a slang term that equates to 'bad energy' – is typical of how some participants in this study blend popular spiritualities with Catholic traditions.

Marline

Marline works as a teacher in a non-Catholic school. Until recently, she was a regular Mass attendee, was on the reading roster in her local parish and assisted with small group sacramental classes. When I asked about her current participation, she describes herself as a 'horrified bystander'. This, she claims, is because of the hypocrisy and inaction of the Australian hierarchy around the current crisis involving CPCSA.

Marline often enters a church to feel close to God. She says, 'My participation is minimal to nil simply because while the faith, the faith I believe in is strong ... it's the practices and the structures and the institution that I find problematic.' She recalls the following:

I might take myself off to the church quietly. I may just do a Rosary ... I have essentially abandoned the rituals of the institution, but I turn to the Rosary when I need clarity. It provides comfort – the simple act of reciting those words is meditative and calming. I have turned to the Rosary for as long as I can remember.

Even though Marline has a strong affiliation with Mary the mother of Jesus and the Rosary, she critiques magisterial Mariology as limited and oppressive for women. She states, 'We are set up to fail. We cannot be both [virgin and mother]. We can't. It is just impossible. So here we are ... we are expected to accept inadequacy.'

Taking the viewpoint that Mary is 'sidelined' by the magisterium, Marline links Mary's marginalization to the inequality women experience in

Catholicism. She asserts, 'We are one of the very few, if only Christian faiths that puts Mary at the front. We have this extraordinary connection to the Madonna and there she is sidelined. Females are sidelined ... she is the great saint. She sacrificed so much. Imagine, the idea of watching your son being crucified and still holding faith – it is extraordinary.'

Marline does not have any difficulty with the magisterial notion that purports women, like Mary, should take on a nurturing role. Her issue is with the hypocrisy of the hierarchy and the lack of equality for women in Catholicism. She reflects, 'Every image of Mary where she is nurturing, she is in the background, but she's foregrounded as that's women's role. And we [women] can nurture all we like, but we shouldn't be sidelined. If you want that to be part of the religion, and obviously it has to be, then give it its due.'

For some, Marline's lack of regular Mass attendance might be problematic, but it is not for her. Her practice of the Rosary is not just a citation of words – it is heartfelt and sincere. She finds no need for sacramental rituals and states, 'I think prayer is more than kneeling down and going through the Rosary. I think the prayer is actually acting, and being, and breathing, and thinking, and questioning ... I don't think we have to go to Communion. I don't have to go to the sacraments to be to be Catholic. I don't think that is appropriate.'

The magisterium's sidelining of Mary and by association all women means that Marline no longer finds official Catholicism either credible or plausible. She is Catholic on her own terms; this means 'walking the talk' and living a life that mirrors Christian ideals of justice, service and integrity.

'I turn to the Rosary when I need clarity': Marian pieties

During their interviews, participants frequently refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus. They often tell stories of formative experiences that involve being conditioned to magisterial Mariology and the associated theological rewards compliance to Marian ideals provide. For example, Patricia remembers her grandmother's house filled with Marian objects:

I loved them. [My grandmother] had an image of a beautiful young woman with the Middle Eastern kind of – call it a hijab ... looking out sort in the frame. A little baby resting here and a kind of ... it was probably the Star of Bethlehem and a little kind of Israel-style village up on a hill. She had our Lady of Perpetual Succour, the old sort of green-and-gold icon. She had, above the piano, a Jesus with the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin ... They were everywhere ... There

might have been an old statue that they knelt down before and said the Rosary in front of when my mother was a child. I mean my mother can remember saying the Rosary every week, but for me it was more that my grandmother would do it when she had us kind of captive. In the car I remember it happening a lot.

As discussed in Chapter 3, official Catholicism, ecclesial imagery and Mariology construct Mary and womanhood in terms of the impossible and dichotomous ideal of motherhood with virginity. These gendered and sexual paradigms can create serious difficulties for Gen X women particularly in the way that they are used by the magisterium and others to sanction and affirm kyriarchal systems and structures. For instance, Chloe compares the status of women in Catholicism to that of men and problematizes the marginalization of women. She states,

You are either a virgin or a mother. You are not a person; you are a thing. You can't be just a person. A man can be a person. He doesn't have to be a virgin or a father or fatherhood. He can be a person ... It's a lot put on to a poor woman. A woman can be anything she wants. She is equal to a man. They don't have anywhere that says a man can be a virgin or a father.

In Catholicism, women's roles are codified in accordance with the norms of womanhood imaged by Mary within magisterial Mariology. In a similar way to Marline and Chloe, Nanette maintains that this is limiting for Mary, women and all humanity:

When Mary is talked about in that way in particular, we lose so much of her story ... we limit and we place women and sexuality so closely together and I just find it's limiting for all of us, everyone, when we do that, because it so limits how we can look at the human person. And it just brings into me that sense of the feminine genius and the complementarity theology where it puts us all in roles that we don't fit in and limits the understanding of the human person.

Marline, Chloe and Nanette strongly communicate their struggle to recognize themselves in the imagery of magisterial Mariology.

Despite the limitations, participants are still praying the Rosary and using other forms of Marian piety sanctioned by the magisterium. As they use and enact these particular technologies of Catholicism, women are ultimately participating in a kyriarchal culture with a history of marginalizing women. This doesn't mean that all women are self-objectifying. Regina's husband is in a motorbike group. She prays the Rosary only while she is riding with him:

When I'm on the bike I pray a lot ... [Our last trip] I think I think I knocked out the Rosary ... I find it very meditative being on the bike ... when you go on long trips ... you're on that bike for hours. You process stuff, you can work things out ... I'll come back and I'll have it all sorted.

Not all participants are using the Rosary and Marian devotion to reinforce the dichotomous magisterial ideals of motherhood and virginity. Over time, attitudes and teachings around Mary have changed significantly (Monagle 2020; Warner 2016). Some participants use Marian pieties as a type of interpretive adjustment to cope with and subvert magisterial norms. This aligns with other studies of contemporary Mariology which found that in contexts where populations are marginalized, Catholic women are using Mary and Marian devotion to deal with limitations they face in patriarchal societies and liberate themselves from oppressive kyriarchal theologies and ideologies (Abraham 2019; Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007; Calderón Muñoz 2014; Johnson 2006).

However, some feminist scholars argue that Marian devotions perpetuate a constrained perception of womanhood, diminishing femininity to a passive acceptance of subservience. For instance, Clare Monagle (2020) argues that in the Catholic tradition, Mary has been used as a shaming technology to silence women and efface their embodied lives. Yet several participants speak of Mary using interpretive adjustments that subvert the magisterial notion of passive femininity. Instead, they reconceptualize Mary as an assertive woman of faith. For instance, Marline, when speaking of Mary, does not tell of a woman with eyes downcast, obedient and subservient but a woman with agency, power and deep faith. She conveys a heartfelt 'female connection' with Mary and thinks of her as 'a sisterhood role model' who 'gives us a practical link to Christ'. Bernadette visualizes Mary as a simple but faithful woman with sexuality and agency:

Mary said yes. She was young and inexperienced, and she said yes when the angel came and said, 'Guess what it's you!' She didn't say 'Oh no it's not going to work out for me – go and ask the girl next door.' She didn't do any of that. She said yes because of her faith in God. Her pure, simple faith that God would look after her and it would be the right thing. That is the Mary that I see in that virgin. I don't dwell on the fact that virgin means hasn't been defiled yet. You know I don't view that because I'm pretty sure she and Joseph were a bit keen. You know – I am sorry Mary, but I am probably thinking they got a bit hot and heavy – they were a young couple, and it was happening.

As these women enact the Rosary and other forms of Marian devotion, they repeat and reiterate yet refuse to embody magisterial ideals.

The process of enacting Marian technologies of Catholicism in conjunction with interpretive adjustments creates discontinuities and the possibility for the emergence of unforeseen deviations. In the process of an enactment, other cultural conventions can intervene, and the enactment can miss, fall short or deviate from its apparent aim, producing something quite different than its initial purpose. During her interview, Grace recounts what she recalls as a 'spiritual experience':

After I left school, I felt there was a period of time of ... deep searching for something and I started to visit a local monastery and joining the evening prayer. And one of the things I started to do was pray the Rosary privately. And it was a beautiful, contemplative experience for me. It wasn't a fast praying at the Rosary... I had a beautiful experience. ... I was in this chapel after evening prayer ... And I went to confession for the first time in years. ... And I came out and ... the priest there asked me to, as my penance to pray, either three Hail Marys and Our Father or something, that traditional thing. And as I started praying, Hail Mary ... I had this overwhelming experience that took my breath away of this feminine, powerful feminine presence. And I knew that to be Mary. ... Since then, a lot of the Marian stuff has never appealed to me because that experience that I had was quite different to the meek and mild Mary that gets presented. What I felt was very powerful and feminine ... a fierce compassion ... There are elements of Buddhism that have goddesses like that. And it often takes my attention because of this experience.

Grace speaks of how her 'experience of that powerful woman' has totally altered her understanding of the divine. Gemma, now disaffiliated, recounts a very different experience. She remembers praying the Rosary as a child with Josephite nuns. When asked whether she prays the Rosary as an adult, she laughs and recounts the following:

It's funny. I did a beginner's running program at the beginning of the year and one time we were lengthening the length of time we are running, and I was finding it really hard to keep focused. A couple of times I said the Rosary in my head because it was a meditative way to keep counting and keep going.

Later, when Gemma spoke of Mary, it was not of some magisterial paradigm of bridal virginity, she states, 'Mary, I think she must have been a lot more gung-ho than we give her credit for in terms of raising children by herself and raising Jesus to be as egalitarian.' While all the women in this study have undergone formal and informal formation, what is distinctive about the group that has adapted and retold Mary's story is their self-identification with feminism.

For the cohort who pray the Rosary but do not identify as feminist, Mariology and Marian devotion are still a source of female empowerment. These women recount how Marian devotion supports them in their everyday lives. For instance, Veronica maintains that feminism had ‘gone overboard’, causing the family unit to suffer. She is a weekly Mass attendee, regularly prays the Rosary in a group and has visited the tomb of Saint Catherine Labouré.² In her interview, when asked if there was a key moment in her journey as a Catholic, Veronica describes how her dedication to Mary is strongly linked to her heritage; it is part of her. She says the following:

Well, it wasn't a decision about whether I should go or stay ... this is part of me ... I wear Mary's Miraculous medal that I bought when I was [at school] and was working locally ... I didn't really know the significance of that until I went where Catherine Labouré's body was ... it was so important to me to go and see it ... And that was after I'd been wearing this medal for ten years ... We have a family tree that goes back to the 1200s in [Europe] ... And there's all these other things that have religious significance. I've got a Mary's portable altar that my grandmother gave me.

Veronica's Marian devotion is intergenerational, and she draws strength from the faith that she understands as her heritage. Eleanor regularly prays the Rosary in the car and reveals, ‘I've got the Rosary on my phone – I've got an app, and I can just play it as I drive.’ For Eleanor, the Rosary is a spiritual weapon; she recounts, ‘The Rosary is like your spiritual sword.’ The Rosary provides Eleanor with fortitude and courage as she deals with the difficulties in her day-to-day life. Currently estranged from her husband, Eleanor blames feminism for the breakdown of family life and uses Marian devotion as a source of strength to support her in motherhood.

The Rosary and Mariology make up an important part of Prudence's personal devotional life; she describes Mary, who she calls ‘our lady’, as the ‘quintessence of femininity’. She draws strength and inspiration from the way that Mary, who is both virgin and mother, embodies and unites the different aspects of ‘femaleness’ and ‘womanhood’ in her person. When I asked Prudence whether she identifies as a feminist, she asserted the following:

² Saint Catherine Labouré (1806–1876) experienced Marian apparitions that coincided with worldwide disasters. She is understood to have been ordered by Mary to create a medal, known as the ‘Miraculous Medal’. Her body lays incorrupt in the convent chapel at Rue du Bac, Paris (Farmer 2011).

I am not a left-wing social agenda feminist, man is bad, woman is good dialectic Marxist etcetera, etcetera type of feminist. Okay – no way. There is no way I endorse any of what has become so entangled with at best a sycophantic martyr hero persona now – it is sick ... The way in which it has diminished the male role is appalling.

Prudence's views about feminism align with the group of Catholic women who accept the papal discourse of New Feminism.

The movement of New Feminism rose to prominence in the mid-1990s in response to the teachings of Pope John Paul II around womanhood (Beattie 2006). Far from being convinced by feminism's social change agendas, New Feminism is openly opposed to feminist claims for inequality based purely on gender. Instead, by promoting 'feminine genius' theology and recognizing some qualities as inherently feminine, New Feminism supports idealized gender constructions.

Women who align themselves with New Feminism do claim some affinity with the women's liberation movement but avoid any sweeping claims of marginalization based on femaleness (Beattie 2006). Prudence articulates this view when she explains why she rejects feminism:

Look, I rebelled against my mother's 1950 concept of wife and mother ... there is no way in which I identify with that concept of femaleness either. But I think this whole thing of feminism – it's just rubbish – it is just a failure to appreciate personhood ... Certainly, there was an encouragement of careers and all that sort of stuff and that was wonderful – yes, we have the feminist movement I suppose to thank for that but ... I think it's very dangerous to blanket things for all times and places and for all circumstances ... To put a fence around a particular group that is female ... the same thing could be said for you know Irish Catholic males in the 1920s or men who were not Freemasons. It goes on and on and on the same problems with regard to education and rights and everything.

Women who accept and live by the discourse of New Feminism are an important part of the cohort of Gen X Catholic women. They tend to use Marian pieties as technologies of Catholicism to support rather than subvert kyriarchal ideals.

Since the papacy of John Paul II, the magisterium has been openly critical of feminism. In 1995, Pope John Paul II pronounced:

In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination',

in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation. (EV: 99)

In his statements, Pope Benedict XVI conflates concerns about feminism, reproductive technologies and LGBTQIA+ rights with 'gender ideology', which he dismisses as 'man's attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator' (Benedict 2008). Pope Francis more recently stated,

Inviting a woman to speak is not to enter into the mode of an ecclesiastical feminism, because in the end every feminism ends up being a machismo with a skirt. No. Inviting a woman to speak about the wounds of the Church is to invite the Church to speak about herself, about the wounds she has. And this I believe is the step that we must take with great determination: woman is the image of the Church that is woman, bride, mother. A style. Without this style we would speak of the People of God, but as an organization, perhaps a trade union, but not as a family born of the Mother Church. (Francis 2019b)

Magisterial commentary on feminism shifts the blame for gender inequality away from men and kyriarchal power structures towards feminism without any attempt to understand and unmask the dynamics of power in Catholicism. Sara Ahmed (2017) maintains that when feminists bring up the marginalization of women to those who don't have a sense of such oppression, they bring it into existence. Thus, when the marginalization of women in Catholicism becomes more tangible and easily communicated, feminism is blamed.

The treatment of feminism by the magisterium and the divide it creates between women functions to reinforce the subordination of women. Often a feminist is misunderstood as making a point 'to get in the way of the happiness of others, because of her own unhappiness' (Ahmed 2017: 37). Agatha, who identifies with New Feminism, asserts,

I believe now that we need to have the movement of true feminism. We've had that radical feminism for far too long ... I think is perverted and that the feminism that came out of that was in terms of woman power. I think we do have power. I don't have to be at war with men ... what feminism is doing which is, is despicable. It's like, they've positioned us against one another ... that's not how it's meant to be. It's exactly the equality with men. I'm sure there are areas ... I know that we get paid differently ... But then at the same time, I appreciate why the man getting more because he's often the breadwinner ... the mother can be at home to rear children. Because if both were out there, well, good luck to the

children ... I think too many women ... want to fetch a career. It's all good. But what I'm saying is that this is at the expense of something.

Happiness or a threat of the pain of unhappiness is used to compel women to perform in a certain way (Ahmed 2017; Manne 2018). The mode and system of power that comes to mind is that of the Foucauldian panopticon whereby a process of scrutiny or surveillance is enacted with rewards for conformity and penalties for non-compliance (Foucault 1977). The process of scrutiny produces a sense of being the 'other' and othering others. Boundaries are thus formed between women who conceive they are living out magisterial ideals of New Feminism and those who don't. Highly educated and articulate, Agatha and Prudence should not be dismissed as victims of oppressive kyriarchal discourse. Women who invest in the hegemonic construction of Catholic womanhood associated with New Feminism perceive or achieve a level of satisfaction, pay-off or reward for their compliance.

Weaving together personal narratives with critical analysis, this chapter has begun a feminist theological genealogy of Gen X Catholic women's identities and participation. Central to this analysis has been the concepts of interpretive adjustment and technologies of Catholicism. I have shown how women employ various technologies of Catholicism in conjunction with interpretive adjustments to shape and express their identities, while simultaneously challenging and subverting traditional norms and expectations. Chapter 6 continues the genealogy of Gen X Catholic women exploring how, despite the central authority claimed by the magisterium, Catholic women retain a level of agency which permits both submission to and subversion of magisterial norms.

Enacting agency

In Chapter 5, I began a feminist theological genealogy of Gen X Catholic women's identities and agency. I showed that as women use technologies of Catholicism and interpretive adjustments to affirm and navigate their Catholic identities they also negotiate and challenge kyriarchal power dynamics in official Catholicism. In this chapter, I continue the genealogy of Gen X Catholic women and explore how Catholic women enact agency to both conform to and contest the norms set by the magisterium.

Agatha

Agatha came to Australia as a refugee. After arriving as an infant, she grew up and was educated in Australia. Now married to a devout Catholic, Agatha has a young child. She describes her Catholic identity principally by drawing on elements of official Catholicism and expresses an absolute commitment to the magisterium and its doctrine, which she asserts is 'just bulletproof'. When asked about her involvement in the Catholic Church, Agatha speaks of attending Mass on Sundays and during the week and notes that she participates in the sacrament of Reconciliation several times a month.

Growing up in a multi-generational migrant household, Agatha describes Catholicism as something that was embedded into her family culture. She attended Catholic schools but did not attend Mass weekly as a child. Her frequent Mass attendance is a relatively recent practice.

After a visit to the Marian apparition site at Medjugorje, Agatha's faith underwent a transformation. She says the following:

I went with a friend ... I had never even known of Medjugorje. I had never even heard of it, but my heart was open to it ... It was so prayerful – every day the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross. I started to learn the beauty of my faith and that prayer was just not rote – it is not just petitions – it is like it is your being ... there was a lot of like healing because of the prayer.

In her interview, she uses the term ‘conversion’ to describe her transition after her trip to Medjugorje from (in her words) ‘broken’ and a ‘cafeteria Catholic’ to knowing the ‘Truth’. When I asked what ‘Truth’ was, Agatha notes, ‘Truth is what God tells me. The Truth is through the teaching of the Church – the magisterium.’ For Agatha, living a Catholic life is all-encompassing, it is about doing things the ‘right way’ and involves being a ‘fighter for the faith’. She maintains that Sunday Mass attendance must be more than just turning up; she states, ‘I think a lot of people there are just pew sitters.’

Agatha attends regular weekday Masses at her workplace and on Sundays attends a Tridentine (Latin) Mass at a Catholic parish across the city from where she lives. Describing her experience of attending Sunday Mass, she notes the following:

So, I went ... I felt like your soul is actually lifted in prayer. Whereas in the *Novus*¹ I just feel like it is a little mechanical and it is hard to concentrate because there are some people who just do a curtsy to the tabernacle. And it is just like ‘Oh my God! Can you just get down all the way on your knees?’ and things like this. I’d think ‘Why am I here now? I’m just giving myself head spins here and I just should be like praying.’

Generally, Agatha participates in Reconciliation before attending Mass as she prefers to be in what she describes as ‘a safe state of grace’ before she receives the Eucharist. Agatha’s commitment to the ongoing performance of official Catholic sacramental rituals and practices is guided by her spiritual conversion. Her Mass attendance and traditional parish provide a plausibility structure to support her links with official Catholicism.

Submission or subversion

Women who pursue the practices and ideals of official Catholicism occupy an uncomfortable space in feminist scholarship. Adherence to kyriarchal magisterial traditions and technologies of Catholicism, such as Mass attendance and Marian pieties, which have historically accorded women a subordinate status

¹ *Novus Ordo* literally translated means ‘new order’. It is a term for the ordinary form of the Mass, which was propagated by Paul VI in 1970 in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II (TC, art. 1).

in Catholicism, can be understood as supporting the marginalization of women. In a similar way, women's refusal to comply with norms of recognizability can be understood as women's agency being produced in the disruption of and opposition to kyriarchal authority. The reality for Gen X women is more nuanced.

Any position within a discursive system of power must recognize its own complicity (Foucault 1980). Even what might be understood as liberatory practices, counter or external to oppressive power, can also participate in the production of potential hegemonies. Disciplinary power works because it produces and induces happiness and satisfaction, shapes knowledge and produces discourse (Ahmed 2010; Foucault 1980). This type of power is insidious as it shapes self-perceptions, cognitions and preferences in a way that means women do not see or imagine alternatives, or they interpret power dynamics as natural and unchangeable or ordained and beneficial.

In her study of the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2012) argues that women's agency should be understood as modalities of action rather than simply resistance or opposition to social and regulatory norms. For some study participants, compliance with kyriarchal technologies of Catholicism and magisterial norms is empowering and self-determining. What might be viewed as passivity or docility can actually be understood as a form of agency – a type of interpretive adjustment that actively reproduces kyriarchal systems. Indeed, the way that Agatha understands, inhabits and self-constructs her Catholic identity is clearly conveyed as positive. In her interview, she expresses a sense of satisfaction and contentment regarding her interaction with Catholicism. In a similar manner, Prudence speaks of the beauty and deep meaning she finds in Mariology, the Mass and prayer. Interpretive adjustments that reproduce kyriarchal systems, however, are not a type of freedom but rather a capacity for action, created and enabled by a multifaceted fusion of resistances and subordinations.

In an examination of neoliberalism and evangelicalism in the United States, Nancy Fraser (2005) argues that conservative evangelicalism provides a Foucauldian care-of-self technology that conveys meaning and a way for women to deal with instability and insecurity that accompanies neoliberalism. In a similar way, enacting magisterial norms as technologies of Catholicism provides meaning and stability for some Gen X women in neoliberal Australia. This kind of interpretive adjustment does not belong solely to the women but is a product of the historically contingent and authoritative colonizing discourses within which they are located. Mahmood explains, 'The women are summoned

to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they measure themselves against the ideals furnished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts' (Mahmood 2012: 32).

Women reproducing male meanings and definitions about themselves, or other women, can be interpreted as partaking in the 'hegemonic idiom' or a necessary standard or criteria for preserving the established order (Abraham 2019). Women appropriating the standards of kyriarchal systems, however, 'does not signal necessarily a reversal of the hierarchy or power base; it is more likely a reflection of women's participation in, upholding of and negotiation within the patriarchal status quo' (Abraham 2019: 79). Practising regulatory ideals and norms as technologies of Catholicism or interpretive adjustments have accompanying intrinsic rewards that enable Catholic women to construct themselves as being agentic and confident.

Wendy Holloway's (1984) notion of 'investment' is useful here in explaining how and why women use and enact certain technologies of Catholicism and make various interpretive adjustments while negotiating recognizability. In a critique of Foucault's understanding that power subjugates equally for men and women, Holloway (1984) proposed that in societies where there are competing, concurrent discourses on masculinity and femininity, an individual's perception, real or otherwise, of satisfaction, pay-off or reward will influence their support of a certain discourse. For instance, in Catholicism, women using certain technologies of Catholicism to embody a set of magisterial norms is not just a way of ratifying an official Catholic identity, it is also a way for the magisterium to constrain who is recognizable. Women who invest in and comply with the hegemonic construction of Catholic womanhood, as acknowledged by the magisterium, receive some personal gain by being perceived and recognized as a 'good Catholic woman'. Catholic women who fail to enact the kyriarchal norms of Catholic womanhood can struggle for recognizability, a situation that can open women to the condition of precarity.

Status as a 'good Catholic woman', however, is only achieved while the iteration of official norms, especially Mass attendance, continues. A woman who stops attending Mass or meeting other prescribed obligations risks precarity and their recognizable status. In the pursuit and exaltation of the symbolic ideal of regular Mass attendance and other magisterial norms, Catholic women can internalize kyriarchal discourses and exercise a form of punitive scrutiny towards themselves and other women. For instance, Agatha names and describes herself and other Catholics using emotionally loaded terms. She uses the labels 'trad', 'cafeteria

Catholic', 'pew sitters', 'cultural Catholic' and 'cradle Catholic'. These speech acts function as interpretive adjustments which both confirm her own adherence to the magisterium's regulatory norms of practice and act as a form of judgement and classification. Through speech, Agatha is constructing and distinguishing herself via the 'rules'. She uses these emotionally loaded expressions to place a boundary not just between herself and other women but also between her pre-conversion self and current self.

In addition to Agatha, other participants in this study use loaded terms and phrases to describe and monitor themselves and others (see Table 3). Herein, self-regulation and self-expectation generate compliant subjects. Women actively reproduce the hegemonic discourse of Catholicism without being coerced into doing so. In a similar way to Agatha, Billie refers to 'Sunday Catholics' and describes herself as a 'cradle Catholic'; Eleanor and Mari use the term 'lapsed Catholic'; Martha labels herself a 'proper Catholic'; Patricia, Miriam, Libby, Mari and Frances identify themselves as 'culturally Catholic'. Bernadette, a weekly Mass attendee, describes this sentiment when she notes the following: 'You can't just say that you are part of it, you actually have to be part of it. So submarine Catholics are those people who just rise to the surface for Christmas and Easter. Do you like that term? Have you heard that term before? ... You know it's not truly being a member of the Church.' Some participants in this study use these terms to differentiate themselves from the other Catholic women. For others, the expressions are a way to position themselves within official Catholic discourse.

'How do I reconcile all this?': Navigating Catholic teachings around gender and sexuality

Recognizability in Catholicism is more complex than just reiterating magisterial technologies of Catholicism. Formation in Catholic teachings and doctrine relating to sex and gender was a fundamental part of most Gen X women's socialization. During their interviews, many participants refer to the teachings that purport sex should only occur within a conjugal union between a man and a woman where there is an openness to life (CCC: 2360–70). A few participants in this study who had more devout upbringings or whose life experiences had generally aligned with doctrinal obligations expressed satisfaction with these teachings. When asked about her satisfaction with the doctrine and teachings of the Church, Josephine says the following:

Table 3 Identity Labels Used by Participants

Term used to describe identity	Definition
Cafeteria Catholic	People who self-identify as Catholic but 'pick and choose' both the elements of Catholicism they participate in and what Catholic teachings they adhere to.
Cradle Catholics	People born into a Catholic family and typically baptized as an infant. Gives no clear indication of current level of participation.
Cultural Catholics	People who self-identify as Catholic who may or may not attend Mass or be committed to meeting official Sacramental obligations and living out Catholic teachings in their daily life. For 'cultural Catholics' Mass attendance, Catholic teachings and pieties were part of their early socialization and family ethos or culture.
Done	People who once self-identified as Catholic but no longer do so. The identifier 'Done' implies that the individual has disassociated themselves from official Catholicism and its teachings and practices. A 'Done' may or may not still believe in God or a higher power and enact Catholic pieties.
Embedded	People who self-identify as Catholic who may or may not attend Mass or be committed to meeting official Sacramental obligations and living out Catholic teachings in their daily life. Similar to 'cultural Catholics', Mass attendance, Catholic teachings and pieties were part of the early socialization and family ethos or culture of Catholics who describe their identity as embedded. However, Catholics who describe their identity as embedded note that being Catholic is a central or core part of their identity. Often, they express that being Catholic is so much part of who they are that they cannot cast it off.
Good Catholics	People who self-identify as Catholic who may or may not attend Mass or be committed to meeting official Sacramental obligations and living out Catholic teachings in their daily life. The focus for 'good Catholics' is recognition by authority figures such as priests or teachers. 'It means they have either given money, their family's given money or [the priest] has been over to dinner at their house or they do turn up for Reconciliation or they do sit up the front of the church' (Billie).
Lapsed Catholics	People who self-identify as Catholic but no longer attend Mass or participate regularly in Catholic Sacraments.
None	People who have no religious affiliation. In the Australian census a 'none' is a person who nominates their religious affiliation as 'No religion'.

Term used to describe identity	Definition
Pew sitters	People who self-identify as Catholic and are regular Mass attenders. In contrast to ‘proper’ or ‘good’ Catholics, however, ‘Pew sitters’ are judged as just attending or turning up at Mass without living a pious lifestyle that fully aligns with Catholic teaching and involves strict adherence to official Sacramental obligations.
Proper Catholics	People who self-identify as Catholic, attend Mass weekly, are committed to meet official Sacramental obligations and live out Catholic teachings in their daily life.
Submarine Catholics	People who self-identify as Catholic but only attend Mass at Christmas and Easter.
Sunday Catholic	People who self-identify as Catholic and are regular Mass attenders. They may be ‘proper’ or ‘good’ Catholics or ‘Pew sitters.’ ‘Sunday Catholics’ have no involvement with Catholic Church structures or organizations beyond their Mass attendance. They tend not to be involved in parish ministries, governance, social activities or small groups.
Trad or Trads	People who self-identify as Catholic and participate in a more traditional or pre-Vatican II form of Catholicism. Will often attend Tridentine (Latin) Mass. Often hold the belief that women, when attending Mass, should wear long dresses and be veiled in a mantilla (a covering of their hair and shoulders) or wear a hat. ‘I don’t know whether you’ve heard the expression “trads”. Short for traditional but it is said in a way that it’s condescending ... [‘trads’] are so rigid’ (Agatha).

I’m pretty satisfied ... I’ve always been of the mindset that each individual has a free will to choose their own – make their own decisions on things like that ... It is good to have those as guidelines for people to follow, and you know, you might make mistakes not following that or whatever, but that’s all part of life. I think it’s just – I can’t say I’ve known many people that have been able to live by those things, and maybe it should be a bit more flexible, but that’s not up to me to change.

Most participants, however, voice a high level of dissatisfaction with these teachings that prohibit the use of artificial methods of contraception (HV: 11), reject homosexuality and same-gender marriage (CCC: 2357–9), disallow sex outside heterosexual marriage (CCC: 2351) and deny women access to methods of assisted reproduction including IVF (CCC: 2376–7). For instance, Lucy, a regular Mass attendee, speaks of really questioning whether she retains a Catholic

identity. When asked what brings her identity into question, she reflects, ‘The abuse, the position on same-sex marriage – I just don’t think that’s what Jesus would have really been preaching ... the hierarchical power structure ... the fact that the Church seems to be becoming more conservative when really when I think if we want to embrace more people, we need to be a little more human.’

Even if they understand and accept teachings about sex and reproduction, many participants do not allow them to regulate their private lives. Instead, they use interpretive adjustments to subvert rules and injunctions set out in church teachings. This becomes very clear as women recount their life stories. For example, Frances’ children were donor-conceived; Marline, Nora, Elizabeth and Miriam were pregnant when they married; Grace and Luanne identify as lesbians; and Chloe, Antonia and Monica used IVF in an attempt to have children. Miriam muses,

I find a lot of judgment from people that are quite religious ... making you feel guilty ... I was pregnant before I was married ... I believe if you love someone it’s going to happen. I don’t think that you have to go and do things in a certain order. You just live your life and just try and be as happy as you can and be nice to people. That’s all it comes down to.

Anthony Fisher, current Archbishop of Sydney, clearly articulates the magisterial view that any rejection of teachings on sexuality and gender comes from a ‘contemporary crisis of morals’ (Fisher 2021). He maintains, ‘Of course, there are diverse opinions on what some have called the “below the belt issues”, opinions ardently held and forcefully articulated. We know that many people make decisions about these matters from a place of desperation, ignorance, passion or hurt, that can mean reduced responsibility and poor decision-making’ (Fisher 2021). Yet, the Gen X women interviewed for this study speak coherently and ethically as they critique teachings. For instance, Mari contests the prohibition of artificial birth control:

Sex has always been managed in some form and more recently we’ve had medicine to help us control it ... [the teaching] seems to be awfully caught up with the chemistry or the condom or women’s bodies ... it’s always about controlling women’s bodies. But if you really thought about it, we have always controlled contraception. We just have new tools now and everyone is worried about the tools – the actual process of it has always been a part of life.

Patricia notes, ‘I just think [the Catholic hierarchy] should just get with the program. I mean everybody’s doing it. People don’t want to have twenty

babies.’ Monica asserts, ‘Birth control. That’s the most ridiculous thing the Church has ever, ever come out with, not allowing women to use birth control. It’s just ridiculous. It’s hideous. It can lead to all sorts of other issues and unwanted pregnancies, financial tension, possibly even cases of domestic violence ... it’s wrong.’ For Martha, reproductive choice and sexuality are a matter between a person and God. She says, ‘When I talk to women who come to me and ask me questions [about reproductive services], I always talk to about having an informed conscience and making the decision that they know right for them, about discerning it with God and sort of cutting the middleman-church out.’

During their interviews, several participants expressed how they feel connected to the biblical account of the teachings of Jesus as distinct from magisterial teachings. For instance, Antonia reflects, ‘They are all man-made decisions that have nothing to do with the teachings of Christ or the way that Jesus lived. So, I’m not going to support that, because it is man-made and not coming from the faith ... That’s where all that starts falling apart.’ Marline asserts,

I have a deep faith in the teachings and the principles that come out of the Bible ... I see the church as a body of people who go about doing different things. I see the institution as something separate and as hierarchical. I don’t feel comfortable having some man tell me what I should and shouldn’t do and what I should and shouldn’t think.

Ava, who is now disaffiliated, says it is the Catholic Church rather than the teachings she has abandoned:

Jesus’ teachings that I was taught have a huge part to do with who I am, but ... by the time I was becoming an adult, in my late teens, I already was, like, ‘Oh, there’s a lot here that I don’t agree with’ ... I was pulling away from the Church ... I took on board all the teachings about: healing the sick, feeding the poor, that we have a responsibility to people who are less fortunate ... I took them on as something that was a very worthy thing to believe in.

Catholic feminists are critical of the official Church’s dismissal of women’s right to freedom of conscience in matters of doctrine and Church law (Figuroa and McEwan 2024). Overall, however, there was little correspondence between participants’ use of interpretive adjustments to subvert Catholic teachings related to sexuality and reproduction and their identification with feminism. Instead, it was the teachings and their failure to take account of ‘real life’ and the diversity of women’s experiences that was problematized.

The failure of Catholic teachings and pastoral practices to account for the reality and breadth of diversity of human relationships is highly problematic for many Gen X women. Foucault argues that ‘from the moment one begins to be unable, any longer, to think things as one usually thinks them, transformation becomes simultaneously very urgent, very difficult, and altogether possible’ (Foucault 1982: 34). Within official Catholicism, transformation can often seem impossible. For example, Grace says the following:

I thought God would leave my life ... because I thought God will become absent because of my choice to enter into [a lesbian] relationship. And [God] never did – [God] never left me at all. My relationship with God didn’t change. And I listened really hard for a long time for that, but it never happened. So since then, I’ve kind of started to refer to myself as a lesbian Christian, but I’ve had to be very careful about where I say that.

When a participant’s milieu does not include knowledge of others who have breached the gendered and sexual framework of teachings generated by the magisterium, they can find life conflictive and teachings around gender and sexuality difficult to reconcile. For instance, Regina recalls how she felt when her husband left her, and they divorced:

When I divorced, I was the only person in my entire family – the first person ever to have been through a divorce. My Mum was the only female out of two sisters and a mother that drove [a car] – none of them worked. There was, I don’t know, a quite old-fashioned sort of view of a female’s role, I guess.

Luanne recounts her struggle when she came out as a lesbian and says, ‘When there are people in positions of authority and power and knowledge like your priests and your religious that speak in that way ... I didn’t know who I was as this young woman to challenge that.’ In living her own narrative truth as a lesbian woman, consciously deconstructing liturgical language, scripture, *praxis* and her understanding of God, Luanne has refashioned and relocated her self-understanding and *praxis*. She says the following:

The catechism is really strong around the importance of the person’s individual conscience, and that God gave people free will and the ability to make decisions for themselves and others. And that reigns over anything else the Church has put in place if you. If you believe that what you are – who you are – is in good faith – in deep relationship with God, is what is right for you, then that’s all that matters. And it is causing no harm to anyone else, then that’s all that matters.

When Gen X women use interpretive adjustments in this way to make sense of both their hopes and desires and the constraints imposed by Catholic teachings, they do so within a matrix of power and resistance.

Religious teachings, symbols and rituals can have a deep impact on an individual's social and political reality. They can function at a deep or unconscious psychological level even after the teaching, symbolism or ritual has been consciously rejected (Christ 1992). For some participants, remaining Catholic is not possible. Yet, as Monica Dux (2021) testifies in her memoir *Lapsed*, leaving Catholicism can be complicated and messy especially given the powerful formative experience of being raised in a faith community. Antonia describes her disaffiliation as a process of discernment and interpretive adjustments that lasted years. As she retells her story during her interview, she expresses a deep sorrow apparent in her manner, tone and words. Antonia says about her disaffiliation, 'I was really quite depressed ... This whole religion that I have identified with all my life is something that I now can't support or believe in.'

Not all participants who have disaffiliated from Catholicism struggle in the same way as Antonia. For example, Skye, speaking of the moment when she decided to disaffiliate from Catholicism, recalls the following: 'I remember it to this day. I would have been maybe twenty-four or twenty-five. And, the priest was giving his sermon, and I can't tell you what the sermon was about, but I remember thinking ... "You have no idea what's really going on. This is just rubbish", and I never went back.' Skye remembers a clear moment where nothing made sense. Never having had a strong connection with Catholicism, her disaffiliation is simple, clear-cut and without emotion. When asked about her belief in God, Skye says, 'I would say no. No. I don't think there is a heaven, a hell, someone that's doing all this stuff.' Ava never practised Catholicism or attended Mass as an adult. She says, 'Once I left home, [my church attendance] kind of - it petered out over a couple of years and then it's been pretty much non-existent since then.'

Throughout a lifetime, individuals take on a series of different roles and identities, any number of which, at any given time, might be operative or relevant. When a person disassociates themselves from a particular identity or role, the process of withdrawal can vary considerably dependent on the salience of the identity and value system (Ebaugh 1988). When asked about Catholic teachings, Skye affirms they never really influenced the way she has lived her life. She notes,

I guess I'm aware of them culturally, but I never felt that I had to follow them. They were more like this is the guidelines the Church has, but it's different in the rest of society. So, I didn't stick to them. I didn't have a problem breaking them ... I saw them as the Church beliefs and not necessarily society's beliefs. They necessarily weren't for me ... it's really just a group of men holding on to power and using myths to control.

With little value attached to their identities as a Catholic woman, Skye and Ava viewed their disaffiliation as inevitable and spoke of it without emotion.

Violet

Violet attends Mass most weekends with her husband and children. Her children are altar servers, her husband is on the parish council and she reads regularly at Mass and describes her priest as 'a friend'. Violet prays and meditates every day. She is heavily involved in her parish community, often organizing meals or prayers for other parishioners in times of crisis.

Violet grew up in a Catholic family, went to Catholic schools, attended a Catholic university and, before children, worked in a Catholic institution. When speaking of her childhood she recalls, 'The sacraments were a big thing ... they were a big deal all the grandparents would come and all the aunties and uncles.'

Violet does not remember a time when she hasn't regularly attended Mass. She says the following: '[During university and while working] I wasn't involved in the Church community so much, but I always went to Mass. Just not every week. It wasn't like conscious "I'm not going to go this week" – it was if something was on.' Yet, for Violet, being Catholic is about a lot more than simply Mass attendance. She reflects,

It doesn't matter, just because you go to Mass, it doesn't make you a good person. You can do a lot of good for people and that's just as important ... I work in a refugee centre. I just rang and said, 'how can I get involved?' ... It is not a Catholic centre; I don't think it is religious. I have never asked.

Violet cites her Mum and Dad as the biggest influence on her life and Catholic practice. She muses, 'I think they just kind of led by example.' Violet believes most of the Catholic teachings around gender and sexuality are 'a bit out-dated'. Her grandmother was an anti-abortion activist, yet she asserts that she disagrees with Catholic teachings on abortion, women priests, homosexuality, sex before marriage and priestly celibacy. She declares, 'There should be married priests. It is the most unnatural thing in the world. Half the priests

have girlfriends or the ones that I know do. And so, they should have. Most of the ones I know have always had a partner. I think that is perfectly natural.'

When asked if there were any key moments where she decided to stay involved in Catholicism, Violet explains the following:

I question being a practicing Catholic more now than I ever did ... I don't battle with it but certainly my husband and I have had discussions about it. I don't know whether it is a bit as a blind faith, and you just go along and you know you just believe everything. But the Royal Commission² sort of knocked us around a bit ... I was 'what in the hell am I getting my kids involved in? I've believed this all my life' but we've had massive family discussions about it and that sort of cleared it a bit for me by saying 'put the Catholic Church to the side and have your relationship with God.'

'What in the hell am I getting my kids involved in?': The crisis of clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CPCSA)

The crisis of clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CPCSA) in the Catholic Church and the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA 2012–17) are significant moments of discontinuity in the genealogy of Gen X women in Australia. Just like so many of my participants, I began my research with significant insider knowledge of CPCSA within the Catholic Church in Australia. Not unlike Violet, Marline, Billie, Bernadette, Ruby and some of the other participants in this study, I know survivors as friends and colleagues and have first-hand experiences with priests who are perpetrators. The notorious paedophile Vincent Ryan was my parish priest as a teenager, and I was sidelined as an adult for reporting clergy misconduct. The RCIRCSA shattered any illusion that CPCSA was isolated to a few 'bad' priests.

The RCIRCSA and associated media attention increased awareness of CPCSA among Australians, leading to an internal crisis in the confidence of the Catholic Church (Dixon 2023). The commission received more reports of

² In Australia, royal commissions are the highest form of public inquiry on matters of significant public concern. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA 2012–17) was established to investigate how institutions addressed allegations and instances of child sexual abuse. Its goal was to uncover systemic failures, hold institutions accountable and propose measures to better protect children in the future (RCIRCSA 2017a).

child sexual abuse (CSA) from affected persons abused in Catholic institutions and organizations than from any other setting (RCIRCSA 2017a). The largest proportion (74.7 per cent) of victim-survivors in private sessions recalled experiences of CSA in Catholic organizations perpetrated by people in ministry, including priests, brothers³ and nuns (RCIRCSA 2017b: 82). Many victim-survivors (17 per cent) were abused by multiple perpetrators in Catholic settings (RCIRCSA 2017b: 83). Indeed, the RCIRCSA estimates that 7.9 per cent of priests who ministered during the period 1950 to 2010 were alleged perpetrators (RCIRCSA 2017b: 85). Furthermore, the RCIRCSA found that senior authority figures of the Catholic Church, both in Australia and overseas, were aware of the crisis of CPCS and failed to respond, leaving children at risk. Evidence received by the commission showed that there were in some cases systematic failures and cover-ups (RCIRCSA 2017b).

During interviews, two participants disclosed that their siblings were victim-survivors of CPCS in the Catholic Church. Their first-hand accounts convey the vicarious trauma of families and communities that have experienced CPCS. Bernadette relates how she feels about the sexual abuse of children by priests, knowing her brother is a victim-survivor:

It is not just stories that I'm hearing from other people. I have actually witnessed a human being, with no life, shattered ... Listening to people and hearing their stories and knowing what the Church has done ... It is a key moment because I really do get it – it is not just hearing someone's story. I am part of the story now.

Ruby's brother is also a victim-survivor of clerical abuse. She says, 'My brother was interfered with by priests and that was a bit of an undoing.'

Cultural trauma 'refers to the impact of serious and awful events, which affect community well-being, group identity, social cohesion, and group safety' (McPhillips 2017: 134–5). At the time of interviews, the RCIRCSA had published its final reports, and there were accusations of abuse directed at clerics appearing frequently in media reports. Many of the interview narratives reveal a high level of cultural trauma. Several participants mentioned high-profile clerics that had been accused of abuse or cover-ups including Cardinal George Pell, Vincent Ryan and Bishop Philip Wilson. Violet speaks of a relative who was convicted of abusing children. She notes the following:

³ Refers to men who, like nuns, undertake a public profession of vows promising a life-long commitment to the Church and its mission (CCC: 914).

[A relative] he was involved in it. And it's really taken the wind out of our sails a bit ... The sexual abuse crisis has impacted me directly. Not me as a victim. I have family that was a perpetrator, but you know I'm not convinced he was. And some of the kids that we went to school with ... they've made it up so they can get payouts ... It was tough and people would ring, or I would see people and they'd go 'Oh my God! Did you hear!' ... So that that threw me, but you know some of the harrowing stories you hear. There were definitely perpetrators.

Kim states, 'I can sort of sit on the periphery, but it is so harmful and soul-destroying to me. It takes me about a week to get over some of the stories I'm seeing in the media.' During interviews, participants explain the different technologies and interpretive adjustments they employ to try and make sense of media accounts and personal stories of abuse from family and friends. For example, Violet recalls having long discussions with her husband in an attempt to reconcile her faith, her Catholic identity and the horrendous crimes perpetrated in the Catholic Church.

Participants use evasive language as a type of interpretive adjustment to avoid naming and to mitigate or extenuate the seriousness of the actions of priests. For example, Audrey says the following:

There was one priest – I would never say he did anything. He used to take a bunch of girls away on camp ... We did that a couple of times ... I was a leader on that once because it was a fun thing to do in the holidays ... He was really lovely, and I remember one incident where he might have inappropriately snapped the swimming cossie of one of the other girls, and us all kind of laughing about it and thinking that it was a bit – a little bit sleazy, but I never heard anything else ... In retrospect, I look back and go that's a pretty odd thing to do, to take sixteen 13-year-olds and four 17-year-olds away to the country camping ... It wasn't a bra strap; it was like the hip ... She'd come out the pool or the river or wherever we were... But I remember us all kind of, you know, going, 'Oh, we better be careful,' or something like that. Yes, borderline appropriate.

Several participants begin accounts of stories of perpetrator priests with incredulity that the person they knew was capable of the crime. It is not that they disbelieved accounts of abuse but had a cognitive difficulty reconciling the apparent 'goodness' of the perpetrator with their crime. Stella recalls the following:

Yeah – I just find it really bizarre ... So apparently the brothers and this priest were up to no good ... but it was never anything that was offered to me or tried on me ... I had good support but people who were at that facility had had

dreadful experiences. So, I don't really understand it but I'm just thankful that I was alright.

Emma remembers an encounter with Vincent Ryan, 'I thought "he seems like he is a really nice fellow" ... Low and behold it turned out to be Vincent Ryan didn't it – who is in jail.'

There were participants who struggled to articulate their own experiences of abuse by priests and used evasive strategies to wilfully dismiss and avoid directly confronting the reality of their trauma. Billie and Mari remember what they understand as 'near misses'. Billie recalls the following:

We had a priest that took my sister and I out. Mum was working and was saying 'Oh my gosh – I don't know what I'm going to do' and he was over for dinner. He is now in jail. And he said 'Oh I'll take the girls – I will take them' ... for a drive. And mum went 'Oh that'll be lovely' – we didn't have a choice. And we went. But we got to a [location] and he stripped down to his undies. And my sister – she remembers it vividly. I don't remember much about it. I know we said we wanted to go home, and he got really cross and made us sit in the back of the car and he drove home. He kept taking us to a different [places] and she just said 'no' ... and she was younger than me. And we went home and told Mum and Dad and they said, 'well nothing happened' and 'he wouldn't have been doing anything' and 'he's a priest for goodness' sake. But then he's now in jail. And my sister and I say, 'someone was looking after us that day'. Because if he had of touched us, we would have been too scared to go home and tell Mum. And we would be just yet another abuse victim.

Mari remembers:

When I was in year five and year six in primary school there was this visiting priest that would come quite a lot to the school. And he always had this reputation as being good with children. And he also had as a role as kind of working with some disabled kids. And a couple of friends and I at one point looked at each other and went 'We don't like Father' ... And it was just sort of a real moment of revelation – 'Did he do that to you?' ... He used to just hold us on the chest. We were very early prepubescent girls. And he was always cuddling us in ways which we really didn't like. And something about it felt off. And I remember very clearly a few times after Mass he would gather children to him and girls and hold their breasts ... And now I look back at him and go 'Oh my god – that was in front of like our families' ... It was like this gut sense of 'I don't like this. Why is this adult doing this? Other adults don't touch me like this. I don't want to do it.'

The type of experiences that Mari and Billie report in their interviews are often not identified as sexual abuse. Discourses about gender and sexuality can impact whether female victim-survivors disclose CPCSA (McPhillips et al. 2022). For instance, women can attach stigma and feelings of shame and self-blame to experiences, which induces self-silencing. Furthermore, behavioural indicators for abuse can be ambiguous, requiring onlookers and children themselves to make judgements to decide if there is cause for concern (Munro and Fish 2015). Grooming behaviours by perpetrators can create a sense of fear, shame and confusion, often leading victims to hesitate or be reluctant to come forward and disclose the abuse.

Grooming is the process by which perpetrators of abuse cultivate the trust of a child, significant adults and the community for the specific goal of gaining access to a child so that they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them (McAlinden 2012; O'Leary, Koh and Dare 2017). Grooming can involve actions that increase a perpetrator's opportunity of abusing a child undetected (Munro and Fish 2015). Josephine explains how her family was groomed:

The school my [male siblings] went to, now in hindsight, it was just rife with paedophiles. All the brothers were paedophiles and the priests there ... a lot of the boys' lives have been ruined from. Those brothers that were the paedophiles, came to our house. We've got photos in our family album and stuff. But at the time we never knew, and it was quite shocking when it all came out ... it's horrible, horrible, horrible stuff ... one of my brothers was quite angry with my parents, but they didn't know ... [paedophiles are] such professionals at grooming the community as well as grooming the boys, so that you aren't aware of them.

Within religious organizations such as the Catholic Church, grooming of individuals and communities is hard to detect. Situations can be complicated because benign and grooming behaviours can share the same goals (Munro and Fish 2015; O'Leary, Koh and Dare 2017). This may account for the participants' conflictive narratives, where their interpretive adjustments involve a mix of scepticism and certainty as they negotiate and try to make sense of their experiences.

The role of women in the crisis of abuse

The role of women, including nuns, in the crisis of abuse which continues to plague the Catholic Church has been largely silenced. The focus on clerical

men as perpetrators and boys as victim-survivors has meant that the role of women and girls in the crisis has not been adequately identified or addressed (Marcel 2013; Tuttle 2020). Discourses about gender and sexuality in Catholicism can mean that women and girls can anticipate being disbelieved and blamed for abuse, delaying or preventing disclosure (McPhillips et al. 2022). Hermeneutical and testimonial injustices mean that even when women speak out, perpetrators in positions of authority are more likely to be believed than those affected (Fricker 2007). Moreover, despite a growing body of evidence, there is incredulity that nuns can be either victim-survivors or perpetrators of abuse (Haslbeck et al. 2020; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). As a result, the nexus of nun abuse and perpetration remains poorly understood and inadequately addressed.

Public inquiries, media reports and research efforts provide evidence of two central facts regarding the involvement of nuns in the crisis. Firstly, nuns have been subject to significant levels of widespread sexual and spiritual abuse by clerical perpetrators for much of the twentieth century (Haslbeck et al. 2020; Figueroa and Tombs 2022). The scale of nun abuse was known to church leaders in the mid-1990s when reports were first delivered to the Vatican; however none of the recommendations were acted upon, and the violence was never addressed (Giuffrida 2024a; Figueroa and Tombs 2022). Media reports and activism have been significant in breaching the silence. Powerful testimonies gathered by the advocacy group *Voices of Faith*, together with key court cases, have brought credibility to affected women's narratives and the issue of the abuse of nuns into the public sphere (McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Wagner 2018, 2019). Lizbeth expresses some knowledge of the abuse of nuns and the campaigns for reforms.

Secondly, nuns have been involved in enabling clerical perpetrators by providing access to children, as well as abusing women and children physically, sexually and psychologically (HIAI 2017; Gott 2022; SCAI 2018, 2019). Prevalence rates for abuse perpetrated by nuns are difficult to estimate. Despite strong evidence from public enquires there is often disbelief and scepticism that nuns could be perpetrators of abuse (McPhillips and McEwan 2022). Gender bias and stereotyping can minimize female-perpetrated violence and trigger shame leading to underreporting (McPhillips et al. 2020).

In this study, although most participants recalled positive interactions with nuns, there were participants who recounted experiences of physical and psychological violence perpetrated by nuns. Ruby describes the nuns who taught her as 'unfair' and says the following:

There is not a lot I remember about Primary School; I do know that every time I played a note wrong on the piano, I got hit with a ruler over the knuckles by Sister Michael⁴ ... I also remember when the time came to do confirmation, we had to know the green catechism book backwards, frontwards, and upside down because [the nuns] told us that when the bishop came and asked us a question, if we got it wrong, we weren't allowed to be confirmed ... I was scared, absolutely petrified.

Martha expresses that she remains Catholic despite the abuse she experienced during her schooling: '[The nuns] were all about judgment and the wrath of God ... They were very quick to hit children. There was quite a lot of physical abuse ... it was never really warranted but sometimes it was really out of place. They were quite hostile at times. They were very quick to cane children.' Antonia tells the story of how her mother was physically, verbally and psychologically abused while boarding at a Catholic girl's school:

My parents both went to boarding school, different boarding schools, and my mum ... had some horrific situations with the nuns ... Mum's experience was pretty nasty she had a horrible time ... She had a lot of health issues ... she wasn't always very well, and she copped a lot of abuse ... She got rapped over the knuckles and a lot of instantaneous physical stuff – nothing sexual ... she got yelled at a lot and put down and told that she would be nothing and stupid ... she was told she wouldn't amount to anything. A lot of verbal abuse and mental anguish.

Nora recalls a lot of gossip about abusive nuns during her schooling:

I guess I wouldn't know the extent of [abuse by nuns] because it is all just gossip more than anything ... in my [year group] some of the mothers went to the same boarding school ... We had a mistress of discipline, and they would always complain that they got locked in the cupboard to be disciplined ... I guess that's just what happened. I never experienced it myself.

Overall, participants in this study express deep disgust at the high prevalence of violence in Catholic settings. Their narratives conveyed their disappointment both at the treatment of affected persons and the failure of the church leaders to take responsibility for the crisis. Patricia remarks, 'It seems like everyone knows that people used to talk about certain priests being sleazy or slimy and it was the subject of sort of sniggering or eye rolling, but no one seemed to take it seriously.'

⁴ Name changed.

Nanette notes, ‘There’s been a real lack of a deeply compassionate response to survivors and victims. I think we haven’t seen the hierarchical leadership of the Church really take on board the harm that was done and demonstrate that in the way that they then put victims and survivors first.’ Lizbeth reflects as follows:

I think in a broader perspective, the ‘MeToo’ movement, the way that religious women at the moment are coming out and saying, ‘Well, actually, yes, our women have been raped by clergy’, you know ... There’s now vocal confirmation of it. There has to come a reconciliation and a truth telling on what has been done to women in our Church.

Several participants expressed that, to make sense of the crisis of abuse, they had changed or reduced their participation in Catholicism. For instance, Marline recounts how she stopped attending Mass. Billie recalls how she stopped practising the sacrament of Reconciliation. She says, ‘I can’t sit in there with those priests when some of them that I trusted and are now in jail. What’s the point?’ Such discontinuities can interrupt or call into question hegemonic practices in Catholicism providing opportunities for new technologies of Catholicism to emerge.

Frances

Frances was raised with a strong sense of Catholic identity by a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. Growing up, her parents prioritized leading ‘a good life’ and ‘being a good person’ over Mass attendance and sacramental participation. Frances went to Mass only at Christmas and Easter and received most of her Catholic formation during scripture classes at her local public school. Recounting her experience of her first Eucharist and Reconciliation, she muses, ‘I don’t mean to be derogatory, but it was important in the same way as when I got my hostess badge from Brownies. A ceremony I engaged with. I didn’t feel like I’d entered another level in the Church or participation or anything.’

Frances is very open about her desire to pass on Catholicism to her children and reflects, ‘I have a very strong connection to Catholic culture. I feel like it’s the Catholicism that has formed a lot of my views about how I participate in the community and how I form my views and what I think my priorities are. So, I thought that was important for them to be exposed to that.’

Being a ‘good’ Catholic is not about attending Mass regularly; Frances notes the following:

I don't feel like I have to go to Mass more often to be a good Catholic. I feel like I participate in my community in a way that very much reflects what I think are the important teachings of the Catholic Church. I do that through my work, as well as through my social, community connections and how I try to engage with other people.

The 'important teachings' Frances refers to are related to social justice issues; 'It's that teaching of using your talents for the benefit of others and you're not the centre of things. It's about giving, not receiving sort of stuff'. Distancing herself from Catholic teachings on sexuality, gender and marriage, she states, 'I think their views on women, on sexuality – well, it's probably women and sexuality are regressive. I think they're un-Christian ... I just ignore anything the Church has to say about women because I don't think they have an informed view or an experiential view on it.'

Frances identifies strongly with feminism; this she explains means 'that women are equal to men. That we're not better, they're not better, and that we're entitled to equal participation in every aspect of life.' When I asked about a partner, she laughs and says, 'I'm not Catholic in this way. My children are both donor-conceived.' As the interview draws to a close, she remarks, 'I shouldn't have to leave, they should change. It's my Church as much as their Church. Just because I have progressive views – and I know that's a debate, because my views are quite radical on some points, but I think, no, I'm not going.'

'No, I'm not going': Social justice activities as sense making and *praxis*

Several women in this study participate in social justice activism, volunteer and fundraise as an expression of faith and a way to stay connected with their Catholic identities. Regina, for instance, attends Mass regularly and is heavily involved in her parish, her school community and social justice activism. She explains, 'I'm very involved with different social justice groups, with Caritas and with Catholic missions as well. And the gentleman that runs Catholic mission is also part of that parish as well. So, there are connections there.' For most women interviewed, however, social justice activism is separate and distinct from Mass attendance or any involvement in parish life. For example, Patricia muses, 'The last time I went to Mass on a non-festive day I wouldn't remember.' She maintains being Catholic is 'overwhelmingly a cultural thing. It's a kind of a fealty of some

sort I think ... a social justice ethos.' Nanette reflects on her regular participation in social justice activism as a practice of faith and technology of Catholicism. She states, 'Living out my beliefs in that way has definitely been a practice since high school. It's about doing things for justice, being a voice for justice. Yes – very much that sense of justice rather than charity.' Yet, Nanette upholds social justice activism is also a way 'to be involved in Church without being limited by the structures of it.'

Bernadette describes her work with the disadvantaged and homeless as following the teachings of Jesus. She reflects, 'If Jesus were to walk among some of the stuff that we're doing ... he would hi-five. He would say you have got it. You understand. You are seeing me. You are seeing God in every person ... and he would be very happy.' At the same time, however, she asserts the separation of her social justice ministry from the 'inaction' of the clerics in her archdiocese who have an attitude of 'bringing up the drawbridge' and not letting anybody in. While Nanette and Bernadette and other Gen X women do use their social justice activism as a technology of Catholicism to affirm their Catholic identities, they are, at the same time, enacting a type of interpretive adjustment. Their actions which affirm and renew their faith and identities also adjust their experience of Catholicism in a way that enables them to stay connected despite the actions and inactions of the official Catholic Church. There are a number of possible reasons to explain participants taking part in social justice activism as both a technology of Catholicism and a type of interpretive adjustment.

In an Australian context, sectarianism or deep-seated conflict and division between Protestant and Catholic communities was especially pronounced from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Sectarianism greatly impacted social, political and economic life, and it is conceivable that it was a significant formative influence for Gen X women which has led to involvement in social justice activism. For instance, Frances's participation in Catholicism is separate from official teachings and normative practices and is instead centred on involvement in social justice activities. Reflecting on her upbringing, Frances names her family culture as 'Catholic'. She describes her grandparents as 'very working class, very engaged with the labour movement' and notes how she identified being Catholic with being 'engaged with the underdog'. Frances explains, 'I identified as a Catholic, as a kid, through those things. We always said we were Catholic. I just think that as I got older, what I wanted to do with my life and my philosophy very much resonated with that cultural, social justice side of the Catholic Church.'

Australia's history of antagonistic denominational relations between Protestants and Catholics has shaped how Catholics in Australia understand themselves. Until the mid-twentieth century, Catholicism in Australia reflected a largely Irish, working-class minority to the predominantly English protestant establishment (Cahill et al. 2004); Catholics were generally understood as social and economic underdogs (Warhurst 2008). The discrimination and marginalization they experienced fuelled a commitment to social justice activism and led the establishment of Catholic organizations and movements dedicated to advocating for equal rights, fair labour practices and better social services. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s when post-Second World War immigration and the end of the White Australia Policy liberalized Australian immigration policy that the Catholic population in Australia diversified (McEwan, Sterland and McPhillips 2020). It is therefore not unexpected that Frances, and others from Gen X, would have experienced and been influenced by sectarianism.

A few participants recounted experiences of sectarianism in their interviews. Ruby gives the most vivid account when she recalls the taunt she experienced walking past a state-run government school each morning on her way to her Catholic school. 'We used to walk past them, and they would call us "Conny whackers stink like crackers" ... that's what the state school kids used to call to us ... Yes, "Conny whackers stink like crackers on a Sunday morning" so I guess because you went to church on a Sunday.' The origins and exact meaning of the taunt directed at Ruby and her classmates are unknown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that derogatory chants were commonplace in interactions between public school and Catholic school children in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. In this study, however, there is not a clear link between being a target of anti-Catholic attitudes and later involvement in social justice activities. Ruby, for instance, does not report any practice of social justice activism in her interview.

Participants who use social justice activism as a technology of Catholicism and a form of interpretive adjustment typically have strong formative experiences where significant role models participated in some form of social justice activity. Frances refers to family connections with the Catholic labour movement. Luanne recounts,

It has come from my Nan – from a really strong social justice focus in my life ... when I was a child, my Nan did work with reconciliation for Aboriginal people in our community and through the parish. She was a strong advocate for women and women's rights ... she was a really strong influence for me growing up and still to this day remains my greatest inspiration.

While some women speak of family members who were heavily involved in social activism, participants who recall positive, strong relationships with nuns are the most likely to be participating in social justice activities as adults as a form of religious practice and a way of making sense of their Catholic identities. For instance, Patricia reflects on her childhood memories of being in an inner-city parish:

Well, it was a completely different sort of ethos ... a completely different kind of Catholicism over there ... Aboriginal people would be wandering in and out of the church with their pets at any point. People could get up and make speeches, which they frequently did ... after the homily ... It was just completely the Jesus of the poor thing. There was frequent criticism of the Church hierarchy and its culture. A whole heap of kind of feminist nuns who would – you know, none of them wearing the outfit, living among Aboriginal people, doing work, and just sharing their lives ... [At school] we had a nun there, as a head mistress ... [the nuns] were the everyday representations of the Church for us.

Understood in Foucauldian framework, the identity of ‘the nun’ is constructed and positioned in Catholicism as a prophetic ‘call by God’ to a life of sacrifice for the benefit of the official Catholic Church (Brock 2010, 2013). After Vatican II when Catholic women began to mobilize for significant reforms within Catholicism, some nuns sought to resist subordination within a kyriarchal Church and redefine their ‘call by God’. They viewed their ‘call’ not as invitation to labour for the Catholic Church but to work and advocate with the poor and those marginalized by society and within the Church (Brock 2013). Although bound by a theology of obedience to kyriarchal, ecclesial power structures, nuns in Australia became leaders in social welfare reform, health care and education and some, like Saint Mary MacKillop, even resisted Episcopal agendas (Maley 2010; O’Sullivan 2019). Their activism for issues such as ordination for women, inclusive liturgical language and access for women to positions of leadership and authority in the Church often ran in parallel with reforms that feminists were fighting for in the secular world: equality in law, education and labour reforms and improved reproductive rights (McPhillips 2016).

A common characteristic of the cohort of Gen X Catholic women that use social justice activism as a form of *praxis* and an interpretive adjustment is their identification with feminism. Several participants draw a connection between their practice of social justice activism and their ability to reconcile a feminist identity with kyriarchal teachings and structures in Catholicism. Violet, who volunteers at a refugee centre, explains as follows, ‘My faith is more about

actions ... I'm a stay-at-home Mum which I sort of get a bit of stick about. People think you should be working ... I'm a feminist and what it means to me is promoting and pushing rights for women.' When reflecting on the influence of people on their faith, participants frequently mentioned feminist nuns who had a significant influence on the way they currently engage with their Christian faith and Catholicism. Gemma speaks of her aunt who was a nun. 'She was very caring, and she was always banging on about Mary MacKillop ... and I look back now, and I think she was great. She was a very gung-ho feminist and very passionate about social justice. I didn't kind of notice those things at the time, when I was younger, but I see it now.'

Several participants have positive in-school and post-school memories of nuns participating in social justice activism and modelling feminist values. For example, Libby, who regularly volunteers and participates in social activism as an expression of her Catholic identity, notes the following:

While we certainly had a couple of shockers of nuns, I think most of the nuns I saw lived their beliefs ... I saw a group of women who by and large lived their values, which made a big impression on me. And who were alert to how other people experienced the world and the impact of societal structures on people's opportunity. I think that was very influential ... It wasn't a particular person as much as that general environment.

Nanette explains, 'we had very strong women that taught us in that school ... we were really encouraged to be thinking and to be asking questions.' She recounts a formative encounter involving nuns:

After university and working for a little while, I went overseas and actually stayed with a friend who was teaching English in [Central America]. We lived with a couple of [religious] sisters in the little village. And being in a house with them, and witnessing their humour and humanity there, or humility, I should say. Their humility and just the way they engaged with the local people was amazing.

For Nanette and Libby, 'being Catholic' is more than just engaging in sacramental traditions or meeting a set of obligations. Even while they and other women use various forms of social justice activism as technologies of Catholicism to express their faith and construct their identity, they are also enacting a type of interpretive adjustment to resist and reimagine kyriarchal teachings and structures in Catholicism.

In this chapter and Chapter 5, I have contested the magisterium's assertion that official Catholicism is a unitary discourse. I have argued that there is no single

representation or set of technologies of Catholicism that clearly distinguishes what it is to be a Catholic woman. During their interviews, participants recounted diverse narratives of ritual and embodied practices constructed and enacted from a juxtaposition of the many complex discursive elements of their religious and secular lives. Some women described how they embraced the norms and ideals of official Catholicism. Their compliance produced recognizability and the intrinsic rewards that accompany it. Other women told stories of making interpretive adjustments to cast off institutional and male-defined expectations of Catholicism, including prescribed Mass attendance and sacramental practice. Interpretive adjustments enable women to tactically assert their own needs and make space for themselves and their own well-being within and beyond official Catholicism. Chapter 7 continues a genealogy of Gen X women's identities and participation and explores the consequences of a lack of recognizability in Catholicism.

The consequences of a lack of recognizability

In Chapters 5 and 6 I used genealogy as a method to establish that, despite the efforts of the magisterium to regulate Catholicism as a unitary discourse, Catholic women's identities are complex and are located both within and beyond established frameworks. I have shown that as women use technologies of Catholicism and interpretive adjustments to ratify, navigate and subvert their Catholic identities and kyriarchal power dynamics, they can struggle for recognizability. In this chapter, I explore the consequences of a lack of recognizability. Firstly, drawing on Michel Foucault's (2003a) conceptualization *monster*, Judith Butler's (2015, 2020) theoretical concept *vulnerability* and Sara Ahmed's (2014, 2017) notion of *wilfulness*, I examine Catholic women's potential for agency in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism. Through analysis of participants' stories of harm and suffering in Catholic settings, I theorize the day-to-day struggle of women in Catholicism as a form of gender-based violence. I then introduce the framework which I name *everyday spiritual abuse* to conceptualize the harm women experience as they negotiate the multiple material, spiritual and structural inequalities in Catholicism. I argue that everyday spiritual abuses occur because women lack recognizability within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism.

Abnormal individuals

In his analysis of power dynamics, Foucault (2003a) uses the term *monster* to name abnormal individuals, or persons who are discursively constructed within a network of power and knowledge, yet unexpectedly, at the same time, exceed or transgress the hegemonic conceptualization of subjectivity. As I explored in Chapter 4, Foucault's analysis of the monster is concerned with questioning discursive categories. Foucault (2003a) explains that monsters, by their very

existence, fail to embody yet also threaten the natural inevitability of established groupings and systems of power-knowledge.

Within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, the enactment of gender, which the magisterium deems inherent and natural, is, like any gendered performance, inherently unstable. It is not through the magisterium's prescription of gendered and regulatory norms but in and through their citation and performance that women become gendered subjects of Catholicism. This is because the norms or laws that regulate gendered Catholic identities are never exact and can only ever be an imitation of magisterial discourse.

As women participate in and perform official technologies of Catholicism over and over again, their own actions can become techniques of normalization that perpetuate and legitimize kyriarchal power relations, male normativity and female difference. Yet, unable to embody maleness or the Church-sanctioned norm of the abstract maternal archetype of Mary, women constantly strive for but never fully achieve recognizability in Catholicism. As I contend in chapters 5 and 6, when Catholic women enact technologies of Catholicism, perform interpretive adjustments, live embodied lives, menstruate, choose women as intimate partners, use artificial contraception, give birth and lactate, they are not merely affirming and reproducing but also subversively parodying the norm of the 'good Catholic woman' set by the magisterium.

Paradoxically, the actuality of Catholic women existing beyond the magisterium's discursive construct of 'good Catholic woman' but still within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism establishes them as monsters. The label 'monster', however, has negative connotations and risks making women abject. I will argue that a different term is needed to explain women's positionality and agency in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, and here I draw on Butler's term vulnerability and Ahmed's notion of wilfulness.

Establishing vulnerability

In an analysis of the precarity of populations who lack recognizability within institutions, structures and systems, of which the Catholic Church is an example, Butler (2018, 2020) examines vulnerability as a theoretical concept. Butler maintains that a person not being recognizable results in a certain bodily vulnerability assigned by the discursive relations through which a body is, or is not, constituted. Thus, a lack of subjectivity in Catholicism, which establishes women as monsters, also infers vulnerability. Here, vulnerability should not be

understood as simply a 'subjective state, but rather as a feature of our shared or independent lives' (Butler 2020: 570). This means Catholic women are not simply vulnerable. Instead, vulnerability is established in the way they are valued and disvalued within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism.

The vulnerability of Catholic women, however, is not only a type of oppression. Performativity operates through two dimensions: the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting. Accordingly, in a system of power-knowledge when norms act on a person, it follows that a person is susceptible or vulnerable to that action. This means that, in a theoretical sense, vulnerability is not a purposeful choice. Vulnerability is a response to the processes of normative power that exist prior to any possibility of forming or enacting any self-designation. This does not mean being vulnerable is the same as being passive. Within the process of performativity something unexpected can happen. New formulations of identity can be enacted as a type of agentic response to any norms that are assigned (Butler 2018).

There is a type of contradictory interdependence between the vulnerable and the structures and systems that establish them as such. Butler explains, 'The relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible' (Butler 2020: 583). In other words, vulnerability is part of a relational system, and Catholic women are at the same time vulnerable and an integral part of the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism. A denial of subjectivity, which establishes women as monsters and infers vulnerability, also produces a certain mode of agency.

Martha

Martha works as a pastoral associate in a Catholic parish and describes herself as 'heavily involved, both on a personal and professional level'. She attends Mass at least weekly and recounts her love for the community in which she works. Martha grew up in Ireland in a devout Catholic family that attended Mass, prayed as a family and cared for others in their community. She recalls the following of her Catholic upbringing: 'Being Catholic was pretty much in our DNA. It was what we lived and breathed. And it wasn't something we separated from our life. It was just who we were ... The Church spoke to every aspect of our lives. And that was just the way it was.'

Martha's mother, who she names as a strong formative influence, was involved in lay ministry in their parish. She remembers of her parents: 'They

were very non-judgmental in a time when I thought the Church was, I feel very judgmental to people ... So, I think that I got my faith probably more from my parents than through the actual Church itself.

None of Martha's adult children attend Mass; when describing their practice, she explains, 'They do have a strong, lived faith – but it's not dependent on the Catholic Church.' When asked about her own satisfaction with Catholic teachings and doctrine, Martha notes frustration with teachings around homosexuality, divorce, remarriage and birth control. She asserts,

I do have a bit of an issue with the fact that women are basically running this Church but have not really got a voice ... women should probably be allowed to be ordained ... Or even if women were not allowed to be ordained, there needs to be some sort of equality in leadership, where women have that voice within the Church.

When I asked Martha about her own experiences, she recalled:

I guess I'm very aware of the position of women within the Catholic Church especially because I work for it. And you know I have the same qualifications as the deacon in the room opposite me except I was the top of the class, and he was towards the bottom. And yet, I will be looked on as less than him. So, I am very aware of how the Church feels about women.

'I feel called to do what I do': Challenging vulnerability

Status as 'good Catholic woman' is precarious in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, and women who violate boundaries often live with vulnerability. Increasingly since Vatican II, women have completed theological qualifications and taken on ministry and leadership roles in Catholic organizations and parishes. Women's experiences have brought and continue to bring new insights and perspectives to pastoral ministry and theological discourse. Yet, there is continued resistance to women entering what is still a clerical and masculine-coded domain. In official Catholicism, the separation of private and public spaces is clearly established. Catholic teachings around womanhood relegate the religious authority of women to the private, domestic domain of the home. Women who do try to claim positions of public ministry and governance are told by the magisterium that they are mimicking machismo and seeking power (Francis 2016a, 2024; Vatican News 2019).

Despite the suppression, Catholic women continue to advocate for and support the ordination of women to the priesthood or the diaconate (McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a; WOC 2024; WOW 2024). Several participants express support for the ordination of women. For example, Gemma, who is now disaffiliated, says the following:

I guess where I have some dissatisfaction was around the role of women in the Church ... it was John Paul II, he said that not only would there not be women ordained in the Church, but that we couldn't even discuss it ... that good Catholics shouldn't even discuss it ... I remember thinking that's just ridiculous that's crazy.

Libby asserts, 'The reservation of spiritual leadership and power to men, is just ridiculous. I absolutely think if women want to become priests they should.' Ava notes, 'I'm opposed to traditional gender roles ... I just think they restrict people too much ... I'd like to fight for a fair world where traditional gender roles don't restrict what women or men are able to do and that women aren't discriminated against. The fact that women can't be priests has always bothered me.'

A few participants spoke of a yearning or 'call' to ordained priesthood, which was paired with an acknowledgement of their own vulnerability. For example, Luanne is a teacher and has postgraduate qualifications in theology. Not being able to be ordained to the Catholic priesthood has left her feeling 'pissed off'. Nora says, 'I was a very keen Catholic as a child. I wanted to be a priest by the time I was eight.' When asked how she felt when she realized women could not be priests, Nora explains the following:

Dirty, very dirty. It is one of the things that I really don't like about the Catholic Church. They haven't opened it up more to the female population and the sisters. Because I guess all through my education there has been some strong women ... really intelligent and really admirable women ... I don't see what makes them unable to lead a Mass or we would often have prayer services and things like that, but they would never do anything more than handing out communion in Mass which I always thought was very unfair.

The discursive construct of 'a call' from God to ordained priesthood is highly significant in Catholic doctrine. Even though all adherents are 'called' by God to share in the 'common priesthood of believers' (CCC: 1268; CCL: 204), a man being 'called' to ordained priesthood is him being set apart and blessed with holiness and sacred power (CCC: 138). Indeed, ordination through the sacrament of Holy Orders does not just confer a man social status; the difference

it establishes is ontological, altering the very nature of his being (Hill 2023). In Catholic literature and doctrine what constitutes a valid or authentic ‘call’ is at the same time definitive and vague. On various diocesan webpages a ‘call’ to ordained priesthood is described as a ‘wish to give myself completely to God’ (Sydney Vocations 2024), a desire to bring ‘Jesus to people and people to Jesus’ (Raleigh Vocations 2024), and ‘something inside of me (in my heart) makes me think (feel) that Jesus is asking me to be a priest’ (Brooklyn Priests 2024). Yet only a male body can receive an authentic ‘call’ (II: 5). Men who answer the ‘call’ to priesthood are lauded as a hope-filled answer to pray (Cramsie 2023). By contrast, women who seek ordination are ‘monstrous’ – they both sit outside and threaten the discursive limits of the magisterial conceptualization of ordination.

To claim positions of public ministry, women must repeatedly resist vulnerability and in acknowledgment of what is constitutionally kept from them, push at boundaries and question discursive truths. For instance, Martha’s desire to minister and serve her community has opened her eyes to the marginalization of women in the Catholic Church. However, rather than distancing herself, Martha describes how she has fashioned her own space and place in her community:

I don’t actually care about the hierarchy ... I’m here as a pastoral care role and if I can make a difference in [the parishioners’] lives, who cares? They view me as somebody that they care about. Somebody that makes a difference. So that’s what I care about. It does rankle. There have been issues over the years. I’ve been home in tears, and I know that it’s because I’m a woman ... I guess sometimes it’d be easier to walk away. But this is my Church too ... I do feel very called to do what I do ... I get a lot of satisfaction. So, on those days when I go home and want to kill someone because the Church is so far behind with women, I remind myself of those things and then I can get back up and do it again. But I don’t do it quietly.

Martha’s striking comment ‘This is my Church too’ gives voice to how she asserts ownership of her ministry and claims a place for herself within her parish as a pastoral care worker.

Bernadette works as a hospital chaplain. During her interview she noted the following: ‘I’m frustrated ... I feel neglected and not valued and stuff ... I am a girl and I’m not good enough. That is the message that the Church is getting to me – definitely.’ In spite of feeling demoralized by her vulnerability, Bernadette, like Martha, proclaims ownership of her vocation and Church and carves out a space for herself in her community. She states,

I know that I am called ... I will do what God needs me to do – wants me to do – that is my work ... My Church – my people – down in the dirty bits ... My work sitting with old people and families who are dying in hospital ... because it is ugly dirty ministry you know. ... It is beautiful, but it is smelly, and it is confronting, and it can be noisy and it can be scary and all those things. It's okay for me to do that but you know otherwise.

Martha and Bernadette emphasize the importance and urgency of the ministry they perform, yet they also acknowledge the precarious nature of their positionality. Martha speaks with awareness of her vulnerability when she recounts her fear that a new parish priest will remove her from her pastoral care position. Bernadette notes the distance of her local parish priest from her ministry at the hospital:

They wear the fanciest vestments you have ever seen in the world. That irritates me no end ... it's like it doesn't fit with who I am, with the community, with the work that I do, I guess. They just seemed so far removed from how I see being a true walker of my faith in what I do every day. It is not about worship or whatever but in the way I work, in the way I have my friendships, they just seem to be quite removed.

As Martha and Bernadette consciously carve out a space for themselves, they are using interpretive adjustments to strategically adapt their position regarding Catholicism rather than adopt a standpoint that would more than likely lead them to withdraw or disaffiliate. At the same time, they challenge their vulnerability and contest the notion that women who engage with official Catholicism are obedient to male, magisterial authority and are content with institutional structures that limit their ministry. For Martha and Bernadette, their 'call' is to claim Catholicism and its associated traditions as their baptismal right. Being 'called' extends beyond semantics or complying to a set of male-defined, institutional rules and practices. It is a way of life and the action of ministering in community, reaching out and supporting others in justice and peace.

Monica

Monica grew up in a deeply religious Catholic household. Both her parents immigrated to Australia and were from 'staunch' European Catholic families. Monica describes her father as 'Catholic like you have never seen' and recalls a devout childhood where she attended daily Mass and went to Catholic schools. She recounts, 'We said the Rosary every night, fifteen minutes of Bible reading

every night, Angelus at 12 noon if we were home from school, morning offering and evening offering at the end of the Rosary and Mass every morning – it was constant.’

During her early twenties, Monica distanced herself from Catholic practices. When she met her husband, to her surprise, she decided to be married in a Catholic Church. This was complicated as her husband, who was also Catholic, had been married before and required an annulment of his first marriage.

Further struggles arose when Monica and her husband had fertility issues, and she strove to reconcile her desire for children and her need to access reproductive health services with Catholic teachings that claim artificial fertility treatments are immoral and against God. Monica explains, ‘I thought if I do this, I’m just the devil.’ A relative told her that babies conceived using IVF techniques ‘had no soul and could never go to heaven.’ Unsure what to do, she asked several priests and received very different answers. In the end, Monica decided to proceed. She says the following about her decision, ‘I thought, if I have a headache, I take a Panadol. I can’t do this, so I’ll get medicine to do it.’

Unfortunately, Monica’s fertility treatment wasn’t a straightforward process and as her cycles failed, she recounts how she felt abandoned.

I went to the healing Mass at Mary MacKillop Chapel ... I was getting really depressed about my cycles failing all the time. I was nearly a basket case ... I was bawling my eyes out and I was talking to God and saying why won’t you give me a child ... And I think at that moment I made a deal with God, and I said, ‘if you give me kids, I’ll raise them as Catholic.’

But even a deal with God wasn’t that simple. Monica says:

I was still quite resentful because I thought this isn’t working because it’s against God ... God doesn’t want me to do this. And I still saw things in the space of reward, sin, punishment, and hell ... you know I was just pleading with God basically at that point. That next month I did fall pregnant ... It was pretty intense.

Yet, Monica remains uncertain and confused. She says,

It probably should be a conversion experience, but I still feel like my faith dwindles and it’s only still growing, and it is still misunderstood ... I still don’t understand this ‘God’s love for you’ thing. I don’t feel like God loves me. I don’t feel like I love God because it’s never been explained to me in terms of loving God ... I struggle with this all the time you know. I think about it a lot and I read a lot.

Monica chooses to continue to practice Catholicism and attend Mass. She told me, “The prayer I say when I go to Mass now is, “please help me understand this – because I don’t get it. I don’t even know why I’m here, but I made a deal.””

‘Please help me understand this’: Negotiating vulnerability

Martha and Bernadette’s narratives clearly illustrate how vulnerability can impact how women inhabit public spaces in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism. Yet even domestic spaces in Catholicism are not neutral settings. In their interviews, several participants speak of how life experiences that conflict with Catholic teachings around womanhood, gender and sexuality mean they are compelled to find ways to be both an embodied woman and Catholic. They describe using interpretive adjustments to negotiate vulnerability and navigate doctrine with contradictory consciousness and angst. For instance, Marline and Elizabeth were both pregnant before they married and struggled to marry quickly in a Catholic ceremony; Eleanor battles with shame caused by being sexually active before her marriage; and Luanne tries to find a way of being accepted by her parish community as a divorcee and lesbian. Mari tells the story of a friend who was navigating the Catholic teaching that prohibits sex before marriage. She recalls the following:

I had a friend who was a practising Catholic, she was [a teenager]. She was trying to work out this sex before marriage thing. She had a boyfriend, and she kept whittling down what sex was. The definition in the end for her was if she had a piece of clothing on it wasn’t sex. So, she would [have sex] and if she had her socks on it was okay. But they were clearly having sex.

Monica balances her desire for children with Catholic teachings that claim IVF is wrong. Her resistance and agency do not come from a total dismissal of everything Catholic. Instead, she creatively deals with the dilemma of her vulnerability while continuing to engage with Catholic prayer and ritual. Monica, like many women in this study, uses interpretive adjustments to achieve a level of self-understanding and determination, but not without struggle. The processes that produce and imprint Catholic identities and recognizability, also inscribe moral accountabilities that functioned not unlike Foucault’s panopticon. The magisterial gaze that monitors ‘sinful’ transgressions can be internalized in the interrogational voice of self-critique.

When participants engage with technologies of Catholicism, negotiate vulnerability, their own lived experiences and a religious chain of memory, they reflexively deal with intersecting meanings and encounters that conflict with their life goals. For instance, in her interview, Antonia described growing up in 'a strict Catholic family' where a lot of parental importance was placed on her formation and knowledge of Catholic teachings and faith practice. Antonia attended Catholic schooling and went to Mass weekly. In her teens she joined the Catholic youth movement *Antioch*. Introduced to Australia in 1981, the Antioch movement was an attempt to evangelize and enculturate youth. Based on a peer-to-peer, parish-based, invitational ministry model, Antioch groups focused on community and shared faith. Antioch was unapologetic in its evangelistic orientation, and Antioch weekends were intended to bring about a 'conversion experience' that 'had the capacity to dramatically awaken faith and change lives in the space of forty-eight hours' (Pirola 1998: 419). Antioch was formative for Antonia. While it provided a strong support structure and peer group, Antonia also recalls regular communal confession and devotions.

After marrying in her early twenties, Antonia and her husband decided to try for children but experienced issues conceiving. Antonia was faced with having to choose between the teachings of the Church that had been so strongly affirmed in Antioch and seeking treatment through IVF. She explains,

We had to go through IVF early. It was a bit of a struggle to know that that wasn't supported ... We had to battle our childhood teachings in order to be okay with it ... So, you start questioning the reality of life versus the reality of this archaic warped teaching. And that probably coincided with the first time I had to question my life, versus this Bible, versus this organised religion.

The struggle with vulnerability and Catholic teachings and practices has, perhaps inadvertently, inspired some women to question the role of Catholicism in their lives. As I explained in Chapter 6, negotiating her right to access reproductive health services with Catholic teachings led Antonia to disaffiliate from Catholicism.

Catholic women: Wilful subjects

In the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism, the bodily vulnerability of women, which can act as a form of oppression, also challenges and undermines the certainty of the Catholic Church and its magisterium and hegemonic

gendered norms. In a Foucauldian sense, monsters and vulnerability are mechanisms of bio-power. Foucault (2003a) explains that as monsters exceed the discursive limits of their conceptualization, they simultaneously represent the possibility of every difference and irregularity they exhibit. As the 'possibility of the impossible', a monster's non-includable difference is what jeopardizes the ability of an established system of power-knowledge to create and reproduce difference. Ambiguously, this difference – which also produces vulnerability – challenges and destabilizes the certainty and permanence of social and cultural norms. Thus, bodily vulnerability, which can be mobilized by a power-knowledge regime as a way of oppressing and asserting power over certain populations, can inversely be enacted as a way of asserting existence and equality.

This challenge does not go unchecked. Vulnerability implies a susceptibility to being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally (Butler 2018). Foucault explains that a response to a monster's capacity and power to destabilize is 'the will for pure and simple suppression' (Foucault 2003a: 56). When institutions, structures and systems exercise their will 'to suppress', any opposition can be interpreted as wilfulness (Ahmed 2014, 2017). To exist, monsters are required to persist and prevail against the power-knowledge regime that is transgressed or exceeded (Foucault 2003a). Vulnerable populations must exercise resistance to overcome vulnerability.

To persist or resist is often interpreted as wilfulness. Ahmed defines wilfulness as 'asserting or disposed to assert one's own will against persuasion, instruction, or command; governed by will without regard to reason; determined to take one's own way; obstinately self-willed or perverse' (Ahmed 2017: 65). To be judged *wilful*, however, does not mean to be purposefully wilful. Ahmed (2014) clarifies that wilfulness can be a judgement by an individual, group or institution of how women and other marginalized groups interact with their milieu. She states, 'Feminists are often judged as wilful women because we are unwilling to participate in sexist culture' (Ahmed 2014: 154). In a disciplinary apparatus, a judgement of wilfulness is a way of addressing those whose subjectivity has become a problem. Simply failing to inhabit an unattainable norm can result in a charge of wilfulness. For instance, Ahmed (2017) argues that to be a lesbian in a patriarchal, heteronormative society is judged as a type of wilfulness. In a similar way, women who live out their everyday, embodied lives within and against the regime of official Catholicism can be judged as wilful.

Wilfulness can be used to explain the different ways women respond to kyriarchal practices and traditions in Catholicism. In Chapters 5 and 6, I discussed how, in the process of performing certain technologies of Catholicism,

some study participants take up opportunities for interpretive adjustments and construct a type of Catholic subjectivity that is often not in harmony with the ideals of the magisterium. When these women face vulnerability, the choices they make have the capacity to disrupt or destabilize kyriarchal injunctions. Accordingly, their actions are often perceived as wilfulness. By contrast, I also illustrated how another group of participants chose to participate in the hegemonic construction of Catholic womanhood and pursue the ideal of the 'good Catholic woman'. These women, when faced with vulnerability, often take up and refer to kyriarchal practices and traditions. Ahmed explains the power of will can act 'through will, not simply against will' (Ahmed 2017: 75). In other words, some women are willingly enacting kyriarchal edicts to avoid the cost of vulnerability or being judged wilful.

The costs of vulnerability and wilfulness

In Christian scripture and tradition, women are repeatedly told stories to remind them of the consequences of vulnerability and judgements of wilfulness. Interpretations of Genesis 3 attribute the fall of humanity from grace to the wilfulness of Eve. The post-Pauline epistle 1 Timothy uses Genesis 3 to justify the subjection of women in Christianity. The figure Jezebel (1 Kgs 16.31, 18–19, 21.1–16; 2 Kgs 9.30–7) has been identified and stigmatized as a reviled outsider, an image that has grown to a wider usage as a metaphor for women deemed dangerously seductive. Vashti (Est. 1, 2.1, 4.17) pays the price of perpetual banishment for what is judged wilful disobedience to the command of her husband, the king.

In Catholicism, Mariology and the genre of hagiography, or the life stories of the saints, give further witness to the virtues of a lack of wilfulness and the consequences of being deemed wilful. The ideal of womanhood emphasized in hagiographies is purity, meekness, patience and submission (Ashton 2000). Saint Maria Goretti was eleven years old when she was stalked, sexually assaulted and murdered by a twenty-year-old man who lived with her family. She is venerated and was canonized for resisting her attacker's advances, maintaining her purity (more specifically her virginity) and forgiving her murderer on her deathbed (McClay 2018). As recently as 2018, Anna Kolesárová, a Slovak girl who was shot dead in her home during an attempted rape in 1944, was bestowed the title 'blessed' and approved by the magisterium as a martyr in *defensum castitatis* – in defence of her virginity (Wilson O'Reilly 2018). From the story of Saint Mary

MacKillop, women learn of the consequences of vulnerability and wilfulness in the story of MacKillop's excommunication.

Biblical tradition and hagiographies frame the harm that results from judgements of wilfulness as a pedagogy of correction. The costs of vulnerability and being judged wilful are high. Ahmed contends, 'The very judgement of wilfulness is a crucial part of the disciplinary apparatus. It is the judgement that allows violence (even murder) to be understood as care as well as discipline' (Ahmed 2017: 67). The coercive condition of the need for recognizability is implicit. Adherence to the norms of recognizability is viewed as being both morally valuable and essential to salvation. By contrast, a judgement of wilfulness can be detrimental. Women distancing themselves from the norms of recognizability in Catholic settings can be met with a variety of punitive measures from subtle social disapproval to harsh violence and abuse. Even naming experiences of spiritual and emotional abuse, discrimination and harassment risks vulnerability, further judgements of wilfulness and potentially further suppression and harm. This is one of Ahmed's 'core killjoy truths': 'If you expose a problem, you pose a problem: if you pose a problem, you become a problem. The management of the problem becomes the management of the person' (Ahmed 2023: 18). I claim the day-to-day struggle women experience in Catholicism as a form of gender-based violence. Violence is gender-based when it is perpetrated against or impacts a person because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity (Council of Europe 2024). During interviews, many participants recalled the harm and suffering they have experienced as being due to their sexuality or identity as women in Catholic settings.

Ruby

Ruby grew up in a Catholic family and completed her schooling and teaching degree at Catholic institutions. She regularly attended Mass until three years before her interview. She says the following: '[My siblings and I] were all made go to Mass ... I became a Catholic school teacher; I went to a Catholic teacher's college and taught in Catholic schools. I never really questioned it, it was just the "done thing" and I brought my kids up, well attempted to, Catholic as well.'

Ruby recalls never really thinking about 'staying or leaving' until she encountered workplace harassment and bullying at the Catholic school where she worked. The higher she got in the hierarchy of the organization, the more disillusioned she became.

It is not an everyone, but it seems like the more Catholic you pretend to be the worse person you are ... there was some really nasty people ... and they would be the ones sitting up closest to the front of the church every Sunday giving out Holy Communion. And I just used to sit there and because I knew the inner sanctum and the inner workings of what went on behind closed doors; what they said about people ... they were two-faced ... I just didn't agree with the way that they treated people.

As her interview continues, Ruby explains how her brother was a victim-survivor of CPCS. She describes an incident where allegations of grooming were made against an employee at her workplace. She contends, 'Everybody hushed it ... I kept waiting for it to come up in the paper and it never did.' Reflecting on the crisis of CSA in Catholic institutions, Ruby asserts, 'It's just like a cavalcade of revoltingness and denial and I just think it's appalling.'

When I asked why she no longer attends Mass, she reflected, 'It's not my non-belief in a God, or being a good person or "is there a higher being?" It is the people ... who got too high up in an organization.' Yet Ruby describes her faith as 'befuddled.' She tells me how she has asked her husband not to bury her in the Catholic Church – then exclaims, 'Catholic is who I am.'

Abuses of power in Catholic workplaces

Earlier in this chapter, I established the vulnerability of women who claim positions of public ministry and leadership in Catholic workplaces. Inadvertently, women who are employed in Catholic settings can push the boundaries of normativity and bring into question discursive truths. These challenges do not go unchecked and can result in a judgment of wilfulness. Vulnerability and judgments of wilfulness can be costly. In their interviews, participants employed in Catholic organizations and parishes repeatedly told stories of workplace abuse and harassment. For example, Billie describes the systemic harassment and abuses of women that occur in her Catholic workplace:

I work in the Church. There is abuse that is happening that they don't believe is abuse. The abuse of power. The abuse that they put down women ... The abuse of power and what they do to people and how they treat people is appalling ... They are very careful to be transparent in the sexual stuff but all the other stuff ... I don't think they've learned much at all ... I know a lot and I see a lot and I'm exposed to a lot, and I am disheartened a lot more than the Sunday Catholics

who goes to church and sees the priest trying to do the right thing and say all the right things and then goes home. I live and breathe the place I work and the place I worship because I work in the same place. So, I am seeing it all the time. It is hard.

Participants' stories of bullying, harassment and discrimination in Catholic workplaces tended to be more harrowing when women recall being judged by leaders as purposefully or persistently wilful. This was particularly the case when women took on masculine or clerical coded roles. For instance, Martha tells the story of a highly qualified and well-liked female colleague who was dismissed from her employment as a parish administrator without cause when a new priest was appointed in the parish where she worked:

[My colleague] she got called in on the Thursday. Now she was actually preaching at Masses ... because her [previous] priest administrator said to her, 'Well, you are running the parish, why don't you preach'? She had a doctorate in theology, and she was brilliant. The new priest came in and everything changed. She got called in ... she got told to pack her bag they were going to pay her out for holidays and pay her out her time of notice and she said, 'can I say goodbye to my parishioners on Sunday'. She'd been doing [her job] for five years. And [the new priest] said 'no'. The woman walked out the door never to set foot in a church again ... it was disgusting.

There is growing awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment in Catholic settings (Haslbeck et al. 2020; Long Van Nguyen 2023; McEwan, McPhillips and Pepper 2023a, 2023b). In Australia, current state and federal anti-discrimination legislation contains a category of exemptions, which permit religious organizations certain freedoms under employment law (McPhillips 2015; Poulos 2018). For instance, existing legislation prohibits workplace discrimination on the basis of sex, sexuality, gender identity and marital status; however, it also includes an exemption that allows religious schools to differentiate as a fundamental component of their freedom of religion and belief (Bouma et al. 2011).

I found that the exemption of Catholic schools from prosecution for acts of positive discrimination is negatively impacting women. For instance, Luanne explains how she came to resign from her permanent position in a Catholic school when she disclosed her lesbian identity:

[I] resigned from ... the Catholic school that I was working at because the principal wasn't particularly supportive. And I don't know whether it was

explicitly my identifying – my sexual identity. He certainly wasn't supportive of the mental health challenges that I was experiencing as a result of that process and so I resigned.

Regina still hasn't told leadership at the school where she works that she did not marry her second husband in a Catholic Church. When speaking about the beauty of her civil ceremony says, 'That's a secret. No one knows that. I could be kicked out of my job. Possibly. I don't know.' Ruby reports the bullying she experienced as a teacher in Catholic schools was 'intense and hard'. She recalls being subject to moral surveillance as a young teacher in a Catholic school:

I had to go to church each Sunday every weekend. You had to be seen. If you weren't at that church, you had to be at a church somewhere. And you had to live by the morals of the Church. For example, when I moved [to the town] I was offered to share this house with a guy, but I actually had to go and ask the priest's permission to go and live with him – it was okay because his mum was a weekly Catholic person. I met my husband that year and we bought a farm ... but I wasn't able to go and live out on the farm. I had to stay in town living with the guy in town until we were married, or the school year was over ... the deputy principal used to drive past my home in town to see whether my car was there or not. So, I became very good at coming into town different ways – it was how you were seen because I was teaching at a Catholic School. It meant that I had to be above reproach.

In some situations, workplace abuses and harassment occur under the guise of moral care and the correction of wilful defiance of Catholic teachings on gender and sexuality.

Gender, sexuality and reproductive health

Gender and sexuality are central to human subjectivity and personal identity and are key aspects of everyday life. During interviews, participants speak of encountering physical, sexual or mental harm as they live out the multiple impacts of Catholic teachings related to gender, sexuality and reproductive health. For instance, earlier in this chapter I recounted the stories of Monica and Antonia. Grace recalls when she first realized the extent of her exclusion:

I was attending Mass, and I remember at the end of Saturday night Mass watching a deacon doing whatever he was doing fluffing after Mass and tidying up and doing a few things and I remember thinking to myself, 'I could do

what he's doing. I wonder, could I do that?' And I didn't know that was not the go. Anyway, I spoke to the priest at the end of Mass and said, 'Can women be deacons? Could I do that?' And he said, 'No. Rome says no.' And it was like, a door slammed on my soul ... I just couldn't believe it. I was so deeply hurt.

Already vulnerable and deeply affected by her inability to be ordained as a deacon or priest, Grace recalls the moment she realized she can no longer retain her Catholic identity:

I read the Church's teaching on homosexuality, and I had a very, very physical reaction to it, and then I became very distressed. And I realized that I couldn't stay in the Church. And two things deeply offended me. One was that officially I was supposed to see myself as disordered and only capable of a relationship with God ... if I remain celibate.

Grace describes wilfully grappling with official Catholicism's understanding of her as 'disordered' and refusing to submit to any notion of herself as unrecognizable:

I couldn't look myself in the mirror and believe that ... And the other thing that offended me even more than that and still makes me angry is the line about being told that I am called to be celibate. Nobody tells anybody what their call is ... I'm sorry, but nobody tells me what my call is. I will hear that deep in my being ... I'm horrified that the Church would see that I was intrinsically disordered ... That is my key moment. It didn't just break my heart. It nearly broke my spirit to know that that's how I'm seen and the Church that I would have given my life to sees me like that.

Several participants raise concerns about Catholic teachings, which limit women's freedom of conscience with regard to sexual and reproductive health. Audrey notes,

I mean, shouldn't the objective of a religion be to empower the individuals within church with the tools so that they can create their own moral compass about things and make their own decisions? And you'd probably find that if women were supported with an unwanted pregnancy or whatever, that maybe some of them would go on to have the child. I don't know. But the problem is you should be given that, you should be empowered to make your own moral decisions rather than being dictated to about what you should and shouldn't be doing.

Participants mention teachings related to sexuality and gender, including teachings that reject artificial methods of contraception, same-gender unions,

sex outside marriage and deny access to methods of assisted reproduction including IVF. For instance, Chloe gave this testimony:

I can't remember which order it happened, [my brother] came out as gay. The Church doesn't like that. Then [my sister] came home with an illegitimate child. The Church wasn't so keen. My younger brother came out as gay. The Church wasn't so happy with that. He actually wanted to be a priest. Anyway, it turned out he was gay instead. Then [my younger sister] had an illegitimate child and then [my eldest brother] got divorced and then I had IVF. So pretty much six children, we've managed to commit a pretty horrendous sin in a different way – every child. So, really, a religion that doesn't accept any of those things wouldn't accept my entire family.

Harm and suffering are also associated with the treatment of Catholics who are divorced, separated, unmarried or in partnerships outside marriage. For example, Gemma says the following: 'Even though I had never been married but because my husband had been and was now divorced. Even though we met long after they had been separated or whatever. I felt like I was doing something wrong in the eyes of the Church, that I was an adulterer.'

The words that participants use express the depth of their vulnerability and convey how they are beginning to distance themselves from the Catholic Church. For instance, Grace describes, 'a door slammed on my soul'. Elizabeth speaks of 'dissociation' when she tells of her sadness and isolation because of her vulnerability as a divorced woman:

I mean, I'm divorced, and I haven't gone through the process of annulment ... I don't know what's stopping me from doing that little hurdle to go and get an annulment ... when I go to Mass, I don't go to Communion because I've had a relationship since my marriage broke down ... there's a real sadness that goes with that and an element of dissociation ... I'm just in that no-man's land sort of thing.

Participants critique processes connected with marriage annulment and remarriage. For example, Regina recalls the process of going through an annulment after her first marriage broke down:

I went through an annulment ... I went through that process which was horrible – probably months after, a year after ... he left for somebody else, which is what it is ... just reliving and trying to say why it wasn't a marriage. Because in my mind – I love this man. And I had children to this man, and I married this man. And yet I was rejected ... It was very traumatic.

Most participants were able to draw on their own or their family situations when speaking of the violence of their exclusion. For instance, Audrey recalls her vulnerability regarding her own relationship and that of her sister, who is married to her female partner. She expresses her dismay that only relationships between men and women in sacramental marriage are acceptable:

I'm in a [long-term] relationship with my partner. We've been living together for ten years, and we're not married ... Our relationship doesn't carry the same status as others ... we have a very solid, strong, loving relationship. But I know that in the Church's eyes, that's a sin and that's not regarded as a good thing ... [It's] kind of disappointing that [the Church] doesn't regard mine or my sister's relationship as valid or important or as loving and I disagree with that. Observing her relationship – a beautiful, solid, loving, healthy relationship. You know, one to be admired, really.

Catholic teachings related to marriage do not acknowledge the validity of same-gender civil unions. In a similar manner to Audrey, several other participants mention concerns and speak unhappily about how same-gender marriages are seen as unacceptable, unworthy or somehow against God. For instance, Grace, speaking from personal experience, expresses her profound grief when she says the following:

The teaching on marriage is really hard for me because, as a person of deep faith, if I was to want to make a committed life with my [female] partner, I would really want to do that in a church. And I would want my faith community to be part of that. And I find it hard that that's intolerable to people. The concept that it would be seen as less than or an ungodly kind of commitment. Not worthy of sacrament.

Participants' vulnerability was exacerbated by the hypocrisy of the teachings regarding gender, sexuality and the ordination of women and the magisterial response to the crisis of CPCS. According to Church law, both CPCS and the ordination of women fall under the category of *Delicta Graviora*, or the most severe and grave 'crimes' in the Church (CCL: 1379). This is offensive and wounding for both women and anyone concerned with the welfare of children.

Lizabeth

Lizabeth is the chief executive officer for a Catholic not-for-profit organization. During her interview she speaks of a deep faith that has informed her career and life choices. She explains, God is love: "The experience of love. That is the

divine for me, but it's not a self-aggrandising love. It's a love that connects, that sees the divine in each human and in the connection of all of that humanity. It's a turning towards love. That's how I experience the divine.'

Although Lizbeth's Mass attendance has 'waxed and waned at times over the years', she until recently attended Mass each Sunday with her Catholic parents and siblings. She states that 'being Catholic' is in her DNA, yet, at the time of her interview, she had 'given up Mass'. When I asked why, Lizbeth explained that it was because of the inability of the Catholic hierarchy to acknowledge the harm of clericalism and the 'lifelong suffering' caused by CPCSA. She says, 'I just don't think they get it ... So, I thought I would give up Mass for Lent.'

Lizbeth has a postgraduate qualification in theology and feels undervalued. She reels at the inadequacy of many priests and asserts, 'I've paid for all my own theological formation. I do expect more from those who have been formed and paid for by our tradition ... that's the judgment in me, that's the part that I think that's sort of wounded and still angry ... the congregations, the faithful deserves so much more, so much more.'

Speaking about women's participation in the Catholic Church at the same time as her own calling to preach, she states,

Well, at one level there's no real place for [women] in the true decision-making and participation in the Church. We get to participate in Church life as the Church tells us that we can, the roles that have been assigned to us, you know, but I fundamentally believe that I would do a far better job on the pulpit every Sunday and give that congregation something to take away for the week more than I hear now, but I'm not able to do that.

Lizbeth understands that all people are made 'in the image of God' and are called into 'the fullness of who we are born as people of God'. Exasperated with the lack of progress towards equality and dignity for women, Lizbeth strongly identifies with feminism, which she declares is about 'gender and equality'. It is around the gifts and strengths that women bring that have been undervalued, in political, economic, religious and most areas of life, and it is around the regaining of that equality, and I think gender discrimination and inequality are deeply embedded within our structures still.'

Everyday spiritual abuse

Spiritual abuse is a relatively new term in literature, policy and discourse, and there is no uniform view on how it should be understood. Broadly speaking

spiritual abuse is an umbrella term for various misuses of power and forms of emotional and psychological abuse, distinguished by systematic patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours within a religious context (Ellis et al. 2022; Haslbeck et al. 2020). It may include the manipulation, exploitation or weaponization of sacred symbols, texts and religious teachings, insistence on secrecy and silence, enforced accountability or obedience to the abuser and isolation as a form of punishment (Oakley 2013, 2018; Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys 2018). Spiritual abuse is a violation of self-determination; it is present ‘when people are pressured, coerced or forced to accept interpretations of their own lives, to carry out actions or make decisions which they themselves would not freely decide to do’ (Wagner 2019: 79; my translation).

In this chapter I have detailed how participants relate trauma and suffering explicitly linked to their participation in Catholicism. For instance, Ruby describes her experiences of workplace harassment, surveillance and bullying. Monica recounts how during her childhood and adolescence her father required absolute obedience and used scripture and teachings around heaven and hell to coerce and control her behaviour:

He had this huge commitment to bringing us all to heaven [there was] Benediction¹ on Monday nights, Saturday Confession, everything. ... There was no not complying. That was not an option ... it was very strict, and it was combined with a very strict, closed, shutdown existence. You weren’t allowed to go to parties ... it was completely his way of controlling the situation. And controlling getting us to heaven.

Grace explains how, as she looks in the mirror, she is deeply traumatized by the understanding of herself as ‘intrinsically disordered’. Elizabeth speaks of her ‘dissociation’, sadness and isolation as a divorced woman denied Eucharist. Bernadette exclaims how she frequently feels neglected, undervalued and ‘not good enough’. I argue that these occurrences of harm and spiritual suffering are best described as spiritual abuse.

However, as participants told their stories, despite frequently describing instances of distress, coercion and harassment linked to their Catholic faith and participation, they didn’t name their harm as spiritual abuse. This is not surprising. In a kyriarchy, such as the Catholic Church, where maleness is normative and the embodiment of women is ignored, it can be difficult for

¹ A liturgical rite of the Catholic Church in which people gather and are blessed with a consecrated Eucharistic host after a period of public veneration.

women to recognize and name their experiences. Being unable to comprehend or articulate experiences of violence can make women retrospective witnesses to their own stories (Ahmed 2017). Carol P. Christ observes that when women's stories are not told

instead of recognizing their own experiences, giving names to their feelings and celebrating their perceptions of the world, women have often suppressed and denied them. When stories a woman reads or hears do not validate what she feels or thinks, she is confused. She may wonder if her feelings are wrong. She may even deny to herself that she feels what she feels. (Christ 1980: 5)

Yet naming is important. Spiritual abuse can have a deep and damaging impact (Haslbeck et al. 2020; Oakley 2018; Wagner 2019). Moreover, Ahmed argues, 'Words can then allow us to get closer to our experiences; words can allow us to comprehend what we experience after the event ... Having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our own histories; we hammer away at the past' (Ahmed 2017: 32–3).

Participants recount experiences of two distinct but interwoven forms of spiritual abuse. One form of spiritual abuse recalled by participants involves specific instances of misuse of power, punitive actions and emotional and psychological abuse which fit within existing frameworks of spiritual abuse. For example, Monica being told her children 'had no soul and could never go to heaven.' A second type of spiritual abuse recounted by participants encompasses indirect micro-aggressions, systemic exclusions and subtle put-downs related to the struggle of grappling day-to-day as they negotiate their embodied lives and official Catholicism. For instance, Nanette struggles to recognize herself in the words of liturgy, and in despair, she asks herself 'Where am I in this?' Lizbeth recalls the emotional strain of women's exclusion from seminary education and decision-making roles. Distinguishing characteristics of this violence are its ordinariness, quotidian nature and normalization.

I distinguish these two forms of spiritual abuse and name the harm that occurs in the course of ordinary, lived spiritual or religious experiences and results in spiritual struggle and emotional and psychological harm: *everyday spiritual abuse*. I propose that everyday spiritual abuses are practised in the power-knowledge regime of official Catholicism as a form of *redemptive violence* against women. Here, redemptive violence refers to acts of harm and oppression that stem from the belief that violence saves – that evil is corrected or rectified when a certain hegemonic order is imposed. This means that everyday

spiritual abuse is perpetrated, not because women are purposefully wilful but simply because they lack recognizability within the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism. Everyday spiritual abuses happen via various technologies of harm which are imposed on and internalized by women, individually and collectively, so as to police and enforce hegemonic norms and expectations to (1) implement a pedagogy of correction or diminishment conceived necessary for salvation in Christ; (2) maintain the dominance of male clerical power; and (3) create power asymmetries that support the subordination of women.

Everyday spiritual abuse takes different forms and is perpetrated against women dwelling in the power-knowledge regime of Catholicism across many locations and times. There is no need for there to be an individual perpetrator or malicious intent for everyday spiritual abuse to occur. Everyday spiritual abuse can occur in subtle social interactions, via dominant social, cultural or religious discourses and even through self-surveillance. As with all forms of spiritual abuse, everyday spiritual abuses can impact women's well-being and their capacity to participate safely in Catholic communities and workplaces. Paradoxically, however, everyday spiritual abuses, which can be used as a way of subjugating women, can also be fashioned as a way of asserting existence, equality and challenging the status quo. I will now describe in more detail four interconnected technologies of harm that are part of everyday spiritual abuse: misogyny, gaslighting, breadcrumbing and clericalism (the misuse of clerical authority).

'Keeping women in their box': Misogyny

In Chapter 1 I recalled the priest who approached me at workplace morning tea, and not so subtly reminded me of my subservient positionality in the official Catholic Church when he said, 'God made Mary the most holy person ever placed on the earth, but he put Joseph in charge of her.' In their interviews, participants also recounted instances of subtle and not-so-subtle misogynistic aggressions encountered in Catholic settings.

Misogyny is an ideology and social practice where women face hostility and animosity in order to reinforce patriarchal edicts and bias in social systems and institutions. Misogyny enlists actions and speech acts that demean, shame, devalue and discriminate to put women in their place and compel or coerce them towards certain behaviours (Manne 2018). In Catholicism misogyny is part of the matrix of power dynamics that police and enforce recognizability

or status as a ‘good Catholic woman.’ Although misogyny is not directly named by participants, they mention the way gendered power dynamics act to control and constrain women causing spiritual harm. For instance, Lizbeth asserts that gender discrimination and inequality are deeply embedded in Catholic life. Audrey states, ‘You know, gender inequality, it’s so ingrained, it’s so interwoven into the church ... it’s like such a ridiculous power and control style of leadership that doesn’t empower anybody. It’s about keeping people down and telling people what to do.’

Participants mention the way the mechanisms enlisted by misogyny – shame, the diminishment and devaluation of women and gender discrimination – create harmful power asymmetries that support the maintenance of male, clerical power and the subordination of women. Patricia contends,

[There is] complete exclusion of the feminine outside of this absurd virginal mother figure that doesn’t apply in any real way to anybody ... all they want is to hang onto their own power and throw their weight around and so forth ... I just think it comes from terror of female sexual power ... This patriarchal need to maintain the hierarchy by keeping women in their box. It’s not based on any natural superiority, so of course they’re paranoid ... being a woman – I mean it’s pretty obvious the Church manifestly regards you as a second-class citizen.

Misogyny is a technology of harm and form of everyday spiritual abuse embedded in women’s interactions with hierarchical and clerical structures in Catholicism.

‘I’ve made my point you just don’t get it’: Gaslighting

In her book *Complaint!* Ahmed (2021) observes that when gender-based violence is part of the culture of an institution, it can be hard for women to recognize and name their experience. Ahmed writes, ‘You have come to expect it. You have come to accept it’ (Ahmed 2021: 115). Yet, in religious institutions hermeneutical and testimonial injustices make it difficult to speak out (Fricker 2007). Even when women recognize and articulate their own experiences, being listened to and understood depends on an audience being capable and willing to hear women as credible producers of their own knowledge (Gott 2022). In her interview, Nanette speaks of trying to explain to a male friend about the exclusion she feels when male-only language is used in liturgy. She says the following:

A friend of mine doesn't think much of it even though he's very enlightened, he's very up with all the current debates. We agree on so many things ... but he is male, and just doesn't get the fact that we're talking about a God that's always talked about as masculine in our formal Church ... it doesn't really challenge him as such, or it doesn't leave him feeling left out ... I think the difference I noticed is that to me, it's personal, and for him it's not.

Despite the obviousness of the consistent use of male pronouns, her friend claims he doesn't hear them; he doesn't understand her exclusion.

Named for the 1938 play *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton, *gaslighting* is a term used to describe a form of psychological and emotional abuse that uses gendered power asymmetries and intersectional inequalities to rule out, obfuscate or undermine concerns or opposing viewpoints in various settings by making a person doubt their own reality or sanity. The gaslit person becomes disorientated and confused, which can quickly lead to depression, anxiety and other forms of psychological harm. While most scholarship focuses on gaslighting in interpersonal relationships (Sweet 2019), the notion of gaslighting has expanded to include *political gaslighting* (Beerbohm and Davis 2021), *medical gaslighting* (Sebring 2021) and *institutional gaslighting* (Dunn 2023; Stern 2023). In organizations and institutions gaslighting involves tactics such as denial, blame-shifting and distortion of facts aimed at causing the gaslit person to question their own perceptions and conform to the gaslighter's narrative. Yet, as Kate Manne (2024) notes, gaslighting does not require a perpetrator to be hostile in their intent – or for there even to be an individual perpetrator. Instead, she claims that 'gaslighting can work to hamstring someone's mental life via prevalent cultural forces, practices, institutions, and whole groups of people in dominant social positions' (Manne 2024: 152). Institutional gaslighting can be used to invalidate or silence concerns, protect reputations and preserve a particular version of reality or set of societal norms. For example, Dunn (2023) describes how institutional gaslighting occurs in neoliberal educational systems when teachers' concerns regarding under-resourcing are discredited by messaging that shifts the blame to a lack of teacher participation in personal self-care. Manne (2024) explores how gaslighting is used by weight-loss organizations and diet culture to shift the blame for failed weight loss to the individual despite the high failure rate of dieting.

In Catholic settings gaslighting is a form of everyday spiritual abuse that occurs in the framing of sacred language and the obfuscation of testimony and observable facts. For example, in October 2020 Pope Francis released

his papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship. The title of the encyclical, literally translated from Italian, addresses ‘brothers’, and the subheading ‘fraternity and social friendship’ directs the focus to fraternity (from Latin *frater*, ‘brother’). In the opening lines of the encyclical, Pope Francis explains that the title is a literal translation of the words Francis of Assisi used as he ‘addressed his brothers and sisters’ (FT: 1). Yet, at the same time, the magisterium upholds a complementarian understanding of gender which establishes women as ontologically different to men. How then is it that ‘brother’ or man includes ‘sister’ or woman? Claims of sexism in *Fratelli Tutti* extend beyond the semantics of the title. There are 292 sources cited in the 288 footnotes in the encyclical; none are authored by women. While the experiences of contemporary men are drawn upon, the only woman referred to directly in *Fratelli Tutti* is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Despite the obvious sexism of this exclusive language and the exclusion of women from the text and references, there have been repeated assertions from the Vatican that the title is inclusive of all people. Andrea Torielli, the Vatican’s editorial director, asserts, ‘All readers should be able to understand the title “Fratelli Tutti” with the absolutely inclusive connotation that is intended’ (as cited in Winfield 2020: 3).

In their interviews participants recounted how they often have the credibility of their own experiences questioned and are forced to check their perceptions of reality. In the example above Nanette needs to explain the obviousness of the language she hears. Billie tells the story of participating in the sacrament of Reconciliation the day before her wedding and being challenged for having ‘impure thoughts’ for her husband-to-be. She recalls,

[My husband] is the only person I’ve ever had intimacy with my whole life, and I went [to Reconciliation] the day before my wedding, and I got challenged – by the priest for impure thoughts ... to stand up there and talk about how bad it is or tell me in the confessional how bad it is ... I think there are lots of priests in Australia who have friends with benefits ... I’m not going to judge them but don’t stand up there and preach that homily ... Or chastise me the day before my marriage [because] I had impure acts and thoughts for the first person I’ve had sex with in my life, and I’m going to marry him, and you knew I was going to marry him.

During her interview Bernadette exclaims, ‘When we pray on vocation Sunday for crying out loud. It is like “well okay, we are mostly women here” ... “What? Who are you talking to? ... Sorry? What vocation? I’m praying for others.” I want to yell at them and say, “Are you Fools? Do you not see?”’ Vocation

Sunday invites prayer for people to take up positions in ordained ministry, yet as Bernadette observes, a church full of women could have vocations that remain unseen and unrecognized. After Mass, Bernadette speaks to the deacon:

I did speak to the deacon after Mass ... because he had preached the homily and talked about vocations and everything and I said to him ... 'I feel like you weren't speaking to me – you just want to speak to the blokes because they can be priests' ... And, of course, he comes out with lots of nice platitudes and stuff and it's like 'I've made my point you just don't get it.'

As Bernadette challenges the obviousness of what she sees, she must defend her perceptions. In refusing to accept the deacon's narrative she becomes frustrated and angry and is judged wilful.

Both person-to-person and institutional gaslighting occurs in Catholic contexts enabling women's concerns, experiences and viewpoints to be ruled out, obscured and destabilized. The obscuration can permit maintenance of the status quo, leaving women doubting their own reality or sanity. Independently and in combination with other technologies of harm situations of gaslighting are a form of everyday spiritual abuse which contribute to emotional and psychological harm.

'I live in hope': Breadcrumbs

In 1970 priest and theologian Hans Küng wrote that the need for renewal in the Catholic Church 'can no longer be ignored' (Küng 1970: 9) and that there 'must be an end to the denigration of women in the Church, its law and its worship' (Küng 1970: 186). Could Küng have envisioned that more than fifty years later the Catholic Church would remain at a standstill? As I carried out the research for this book, I lost track of the number of people who asserted a strong conviction that change for women in the Catholic Church was imminent. Hope, however, can be a political tool and weapon of oppression (Watego 2021).

Ahmed (2021) contends that complaints about gender inequality in institutions often follow diverse trajectories and can have long genealogies, hindered by precarity. She describes the path of a complaint as follows: 'A complaint is not simply an outcome ... You have to keep pushing, because each step of the way you encounter a wall, made up, it seems, of a curious combination of indifference and resistance. If a procedure is represented on paper as a straight line, a complaint can be messy and circular ... it's a mess, a tangle' (Ahmed

2021: 35). Following the path of ‘complaints’ about the marginalization of women in the Catholic Church can be like following the path of breadcrumbs Hansel left in the fairy tale (Grimm and Grimm 2014). Unfortunately following a path of breadcrumbs doesn’t always lead to the intended end result – just ask Hansel and Gretel.

Popularized in the modern dating lexicon, *breadcrumbing* refers to the act of sending intermittent, vague or insincere messages or signals or ‘breadcrumbs’ to keep someone emotionally involved and invested without any intention of genuine commitment. The term is mostly used to explain manipulative behaviours in intimate relationships (Khattar, Upadhyay and Navarro 2023). In an institutional setting, breadcrumbing tends to take the form of vague promises, false assurances or token gestures aimed at placating individuals or groups who hold legitimate concerns or grievances. By providing just enough ‘breadcrumbs’ or incremental changes to give the illusion of progress, grievances are undermined, and the institution is able to perpetuate inaction and maintain the status quo. As with other forms of everyday spiritual abuse, breadcrumbing does not require malicious intent and can be caused by systemic cultural forces and those in authoritarian positions. Breadcrumbing is an abuse of power which can cause significant emotional distress and long-term psychological harm.

For Catholic women, particularly those who seek reform of church structures or teachings, intermittent, incremental changes can act as breadcrumbs maintaining feelings of hope and preserving the appearance of progress without church leaders addressing key concerns. For instance, modifications to Church law detailed in Chapter 3 that give women access to the ministries of lector, acolyte and catechist, and Pope Francis’ granting of voting rights for women in the 2021–24 Synod have triggered hope among women for significant reform (AM: 9; FS: 31–41; SD). However, even though some understand these incremental changes as steps towards women’s full equality, complementarian notions of gender continue to reinforce patriarchal and clerical structures impeding real progress and perpetuating systemic injustices.

Hope for significant change, even in the face of disappointment and frustration, is expressed by some participants. Violet mentions the small gains she sees as progress in the Church:

I think Pope Francis is certainly on the right track the way that he deals with things and how it just filters down you know even from the littlest things. You know ... there used to always be pomp and ceremony and [the Pope] doesn’t

have a big car and he just gets in his little car and off he goes ... I think there is some hope.

Little changes act as 'breadcrumbs' keeping Violet's 'hope' for change alive. She explains, 'I think [change] will come ... they will have to change something ... I hope to God that there will be female priests before I shuffle off the Earth. In say twenty years. It will certainly happen in my children's lifetime.' Although Mari regularly attends an Anglican Church, she continues to identify as Catholic. She clarifies, 'I live in hope that the Catholic Church will, you know, change.'

In Catholic settings breadcrumbing is part of the interwoven coercive and controlling technologies of harm, which are part of everyday spiritual abuse. By offering hope for change alongside small incremental reforms power asymmetries are created. Catholic women continue to be engaged in church settings and the process of reform despite no significant gains in material rights. The subordination of women and dominance of male clerical power is maintained.

'I am ok to do this, but I'm not ok to do that': Misuse of clerical authority

In a May 2024 interview, Pope Francis was asked by Norah O'Donnell specifically about the idea of ordaining women as deacons (O'Donnell 2024). While admitting that women have always done the work of deacons, Pope Francis bluntly dismissed the possibility of ordination for women. He said, 'If it is deacons with Holy Orders, no, ... women have always had, I would say, the function of deaconesses without being deacons, right? ... Women are of great service as women, not as ministers, as ministers in this regard, within the Holy Orders.' (Francis, as cited in White 2024). When O'Donnell asked the follow-up question, 'For a little girl growing up Catholic today, will she ever have the opportunity to be a deacon and participate as a clergy member in the church?' (O'Donnell as cited in White 2024), the answer was an unambiguous 'no'. Despite acknowledging women carry out great service Pope Francis preserves the superiority and authority of clerical men.

Earlier in this chapter I reported how Bernadette was frustrated with how her hospital chaplaincy ministry seemed incongruent with the 'fancy vestments' of her parish priest. Later in her interview she speaks about her feelings of exclusion:

It bothers me, because it is like, I am ok to do this, but I'm not ok to do that. Like bringing communion to the nursing homes – I'm ok to do that, but I'm not ok to give communion in other circumstances ... You blokes don't want to [bring communion to nursing homes] ... because it is uncomfortable ... But it's ok for me to do that, but you know otherwise. So, the practices you know are heavily skewed away from giving women any autonomy or recognition for the value that Jesus places on us.

Participants repeatedly mention a harmful culture where the ordained clerical priesthood is set apart from laity by the assigning of special status, titles and attire. Despite being responsible for much of the day-to-day running of the Church, laity, especially women, are encouraged to defer to male priests with reverence, respect and even awe, yet are themselves dismissed or treated with indifference.

Harsh or unpleasant consequences can be visited upon women as a means of preserving the superiority and authority of clerical men. The term *sexual economies of clericalism* names the system of both symbolic and real exchanges based on unequal gendered power relations, which uphold and enforce kyriarchal structures of oppression in Catholicism – clergy over laity, men over women, religious over secular (McPhillips and McEwan 2022). In Catholic settings, the sexual economies of clericalism function as a technology of harm to regulate recognizability in a way that maintains the authority and legitimacy of ordained clerical priesthood above other forms of subjectivity.

In interviews, women gave accounts where the entitlement and superiority of ordained clerics intensified the devaluation and harm they experience as women in church contexts. For example, Lizbeth recounts, 'I'd probably say that my parish priest is a bit of a narcissist ... [priests] have conflated the sacrament of ordination with their egos ... I do expect more from those who have been formed and paid for by our tradition, but, you know, that's the judgment in me, that's the part that's wounded and still angry.' Patricia remarks,

I have always felt fairly sceptical about the idea that the priest has some kind of special conduit to God ... I think there's a problem with clericalism, I think there's a problem with only having male priests, but I think there's a problem with having priests at all I suppose. This sort of idea that someone's got the direct line to the big guy and we're going to wave our magic wand over the host here and no one else has got the same magic powers, I mean I just think that's stupid.

There was a sense among participants that priests undervalue women's intellect. Prudence notes the following:

I think it is a huge problem in relation to how priests treat women. They are clueless most of them. It is as though I have nothing between this ear and this ear. ... That I could possibly have read books on doctrine and spiritual reading and thought about it and have any moral information – they haven't given that one iota of thought.

Participants continually question why, as traditional distinctions between the sexes break down in secular society, women are still struggling for equality and dignity in the Catholic Church. Marline contends, '[Church] hierarchy is problematic on so many levels because there is so little transparency and all the men go in and vote for the pope. Well, hello! That is 49 or 50 per cent of us that are, at best, represented.' For Mari, women are rendered invisible undermining their worth and dignity. She highlights her vulnerability when she says the following: 'The decisions are made by men and lots of them. And there just doesn't seem to be really any interest in having women participate in the high levels and decision-making structures of the Church. You can't see them there – you literally can't see them there.'

The sexual economies of clericalism are a form of everyday spiritual abuse with far-reaching consequences, including perpetuating systemic injustices, stifling legitimate concerns and causing long-lasting injury to the well-being of women. Bernadette says,

I'm frustrated ... because they are rules made up by men to protect their own institution – they are not about including everybody and truly respecting individual thought. God wants me to think for myself ... he doesn't want me to just go along. Otherwise, why did he give me my brain why did he give me my passion why did he give me a vocation if not for me to put it into good practice.

However, women persist, resist and continue to practice their ministry.

In Catholicism, even though the magisterium claims centralized power over what constitutes truth and a valid Catholic identity, women are not without agency. In Chapters 5 and 6, I showed how Gen X women used technologies of Catholicism together with interpretive adjustments to form new subjectivities that are situated beyond, within and against the official Catholic Church. In this chapter, I positioned women in official Catholicism using the theoretical concepts of monster, vulnerability and wilfulness. I told participants' stories of workplace harassment and harm and suffering associated with magisterial teachings on sexuality, gender, marriage and ordination. I described and named everyday spiritual abuse, arguing that instances of harm are the result of vulnerability and judgements of wilfulness against women. However, I also

asserted that when women persist in the face of vulnerability, a judgement of wilfulness can result in new opportunities for agentic action. In Chapter 8, I use participants' stories of how they have fashioned spaces where they can reclaim their bodies and Spirit in conversation with feminist theologies to imagine new ecclesial spaces where women cannot just survive but flourish.

A place where Catholic women might flourish

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I have explored how women experience Catholic settings as places of inequality, exclusion and paradox. 'Being church' can mean having to continuously respond to an entrenched, gendered ecclesiology and soteriology that undermines their equality and dignity. This not only establishes Catholic women's vulnerability but also is subjecting them to various forms of harm, including everyday spiritual abuse. In this chapter, I seek to imagine a theological and ecclesial vision for church that might provide women a place to 'be church' and belong to a community of faith - and flourish. I begin by investigating the ambiguities of women's experiences in the Catholic Church. Then I explore how women's *herstories*, in conjunction with the genealogy of feminist theologies and movements, can be used to envision an ecclesial imaginary where all women can live and proclaim a theological hermeneutic of hope, justice and flourishing.

Women 'being church'

Kyriarchy is endemic in official Catholicism and is embedded in Gen X women's stories and experiences of church. For women, 'being church' can mean having to respond to a gendered ecclesiology and soteriology which challenges their equality and dignity. For instance, Libby describes the Catholic Church as 'an overwhelmingly male environment'. She finds attending Mass 'very frustrating and confronting' and 'disempowering'. As discussed in Chapter 7, Sara Ahmed observes that resistance and non-conformity to hegemonic ideology and *praxis* in a community can result in a judgement of wilfulness, which functions and feels like going the wrong way in a crowd:

Let's think more about the experience of going the wrong way in a crowd. Everyone seems to be going the opposite way than the way you are going. No one person has to push or shove for you to feel the collective momentum of the crowd as pushing and shoving. For you to keep going you have to push harder than any of those who are going the right way. The body going the wrong way is in the way of the will acquired as momentum. For some bodies, mere persistence, 'to continue steadfastly,' requires great effort, an effort that might appear to others stubbornness and obstinacy, as an insistence on going against the flow. (Ahmed 2017: 82)

The feeling of going the wrong way or having to persist is what is being described by participants as they navigate Catholic teachings and ecclesial spaces.

The implicit goal of official Catholicism is to compel women towards a certain type of behaviour, which is constructed by the magisterium as essential to personhood and salvation in Christ. Kyriarchal social norms associated with gender complementarity and the ideals of magisterial Mariology function as moral goals to implicitly guide women towards certain roles and codes of behaviour. Kate Manne explains that this type of ideology

enlists a long list of mechanisms in service of this goal – including women's internalization of the relevant social norms, narratives about women's distinctive proclivities and preferences, and valorizing depictions of the relevant forms of care work as personally rewarding, socially necessary, morally valuable, 'cool', 'natural', or healthy (as long as women perform them). Women's adherence to the relevant social roles ... is supposed to look as natural or freely chosen as possible. (Manne 2018: 47)

The goal of the 'good Catholic woman' is put forward as personally satisfying, mandatory for salvation, morally beneficial, God-given and natural. This is empowering for some women who enact their agency by striving to perform the role of the 'good Catholic woman'. Other women are left feeling isolated and rejected. Some experience everyday spiritual abuse.

However, when asked about church participation, most Gen X women recount stories of lived Catholicism assembled from the various discursive elements of their religious and secular lives. Several participants report using technologies of Catholicism in conjunction with interpretive adjustments to find moments of hope and joy and to manage their feelings of contradiction. Libby says,

I really enjoy the Stations of the Cross ... just taking you on that journey and the reflections on that journey can be quite profound. That ceremony is so different from your day-to-day life, it does force you to stop and reflect ... Things like

the Requiem Mass,¹ I think it still carries a lot of its power ... in terms of that journey towards reflection on the death of a person, acceptance, the Church's teaching on the life of the world to come, I think that again is something that's quite profound.

Participants clearly distinguish the biblical account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from magisterial practices, doctrine and teachings. Managing the gap between the kyriarchal ecclesiology of the magisterium and living the teachings of Jesus means that many women experience the Church as a space of contradiction.

Church is at once the mystical body of Christ and a social assembly, structured to serve the Spirit of Christ (LG: 8). In Jesus Christ, God enters human history, and all creation is called into communion and community with God. Read through a feminist hermeneutic, the gospel conveys an image and vision of church that empowers women to reclaim their baptismal call to a discipleship of equals (Schüssler Fiorenza 2002). It speaks of how Jesus transcended boundaries associated with gender and affliction that were previously used to differentiate and discriminate (Mk 5.21-43). Galatians 3.28 pledges all baptized in Christ are called to inclusive, democratic spaces of freedom in communities of shared equal rights to full participation. Several participants use interpretive adjustments to find fulfilment and produce identities in line with this feminist vision and the life and teachings of Jesus. For instance, Helen reflects,

So, something about the way that [the Catholic Church] is organized needs to change. I see the gatherings at the Vatican of all the Cardinals, and I say, 'where are the women'? It sounds like a cliché. ... you just see men. I don't understand it. You just see this ornate building and I think it is not Christ, like nothing about this picture is Christ-like. Just imagine Christ with a ragtag band of Israelites walking around Jerusalem there was no airs and graces. It was just walking the streets amongst the people. And you look at the picture of the Catholic Church ... it's not the faith of the ordinary people – it is the faith of the elite and the scholarly and men.

Marline explains, 'I see the Church as a body of people ... I see the institution as something separate and hierarchical. I don't feel comfortable with [the hierarchy]. I don't feel comfortable having some man tell me what I should and shouldn't do and what I should and shouldn't think.' Veronica suggests 'being

¹ A Mass offered for a deceased person, usually celebrated in the context of a funeral service.

church' is living and leading by example with 'Jesus being a role model'. Violet says, 'I am trying to emulate Jesus.'

This is not unexpected. In his analysis of how power and knowledge function within social and cultural institutions, Foucault (1980) contends that the construction of dominant discourse is a site of power-knowledge that can be disrupted. This means that no discourse is inherently oppressive or liberating with subjugated knowledges emerging in resistance to dominant discourses. Indeed, outmoded, kyriarchal notions of femininity, gender and sexuality in Catholic ecclesiology work alongside other modes of subjectivity to challenge and produce the agency of women. Ahmed asserts,

Willfulness is world creating: willful subjects can recognize each other, can find each other, and create spaces of relief, spaces that might be breathing spaces, spaces in which we can be inventive. If in most spaces we have to be assertive just to be, we can create spaces which give us freedom from that necessity. There can be joy in creating worlds out of the broken pieces of our dwelling: we can not only share our willfulness stories, but pick up some of the pieces too. (Ahmed 2014: 169)

Therefore, even though kyriarchal doctrine and judgements of wilfulness can be organized as a way of limiting recognizability and subjugating women, they can also empower women.

The Gen X women interviewed express a desire to 'be church' in communities of faith and well-being. Gemma reflects, 'I think it's vital to have community. I don't think you can have an active faith without it.' Several participants look back with a sense of hopeful nostalgia on the church communities they grew up in. For instance, Patricia reflects,

I feel a sense of loss that there is a part of my birthright that I would have hung onto could I have done it. [A parish] could be a whole community, a really enriching community, ways to be there for others who need support, within a community that celebrates and participates in a tradition that's been in my family for a long time. I'd definitely have a go if that was available.

In the preceding chapter, I recounted how Bernadette experiences her Catholic parish as a space that is 'not very pleasant'. By contrast, she tells the story of visiting her aunt in a convent and finding joy and community in the company of the women.

My aunt [is a nun] she would come to the town where we lived. I would always go down to the convent ... My aunt would bring me into the convent and these

beautiful nuns would sit around praying and knitting or whatever and I just have these lovely memories of this beautiful space of females being together, gardening together. It sounds so twee, but they gardened together, they sat and shared their prayers together, and they were always 'Oh Bernadette, you're here, it's lovely to see you!' And I always felt very welcome.

Catholic women are yearning and imagining ecclesial spaces to 'be church' and belong to communities of faith and flourishing that support living a life in Jesus Christ.

A new ecclesial imaginary

The imaginary of natality theorized by feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen (1995a, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2004) has the potential to be a theoretical-practical framework for an ecclesial imaginary that supports women's flourishing. In Jantzen's (1999) conceptualization of an imaginary of natality, she locates the blame for kyriarchy and redemptive violence in the underlying theological imaginary of death that is prevalent in Western Christianity. She finds the concept or idiom of salvation that is prominent in Western masculinist theologies and manifests in doctrine 'is in fact imbricated in an imaginary of death' (Jantzen 1999: 159). As a remedy, she proposes an imaginary of natality that invites a symbolic of flourishing.

Jantzen (1996, 1999) argues the distinction between a symbolic of flourishing and a symbolic of salvation is stark and gendered. The patriarchal understanding of salvation is linked to the sacrifice of the person Jesus Christ and the human condition. Herein, the paradigms projected onto women act three-fold. First, for women, sacrifice can be linked to the negative qualities of victimhood. Second, the Catholic fixation on the maleness of Jesus can leave women unable to image the saviour. Mary Daly explains, as follows:

The qualities that Christianity *idealizes*, especially for women, are also those of a victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humiliation, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus 'who died for our sin', his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women. Given the victimized situation of the female in sexist society, these 'virtues' are hardly the qualities that women should be encouraged to have. Moreover, since women cannot be 'good' enough to measure up to this ideal, and since all are by sexual definition alien from the male saviour, this is an impossible model. Thus, doomed to failure even in emulating the Victim, women are plunged more deeply into victimization. (Daly 1973: 77)

Third, in Christianity, sexuality and the female body can be negatively associated with sin and temptation. Jantzen notes, 'As Eve was the mother of sin, so the body, associated with woman, continues to be its cause' (Jantzen 1995a: 88). Moreover, salvation requires an external source or remedy. Indeed, a theology of salvation requires a deistic God, a male saviour external to the world entering human history from outside (Jantzen 1995a). Accordingly, a theology of salvation is a personal quest and can be adversarial as well as gender-bound (Jantzen 1999). The consequences of a theology of salvation are evident in participants' narratives, especially in their stories of harm and suffering. For instance, in her retelling of the story of her IVF journey, Monica asserts, 'I thought this isn't working because it's against God ... And I still saw things in the space of reward, sin, punishment, and hell.'

By contrast, the symbolic of flourishing is a positive concept that Jantzen deploys to place humanity in a community with ecology and in relationship with God, who is 'source and well-spring' (Jantzen 1999: 162); 'one who flourishes is going from strength to strength' (Jantzen 1999: 165). Here, the term flourishing has etymological connections to nature, birth and fruition. In the common verb form 'to flourish' is to blossom and grow abundantly in prosperity and vigour. People who flourish can thus be understood 'as having natural inner capacity and dynamic, able to draw on inner resources and interconnection with one another, and potential to develop into great fruitfulness' (Jantzen 1995a: 87). Participants who have sought and found spaces for flourishing use language that expresses an inner capacity to find hope and well-being in moments of connection with the divine. For instance, Nanette reflects,

I'll often pause for a moment ... whether it's the sunset or sunrise on the train trip up and down to work or a great view. I've got an amazing view out my window that looks out over [the city] and the sky and you can see the weather coming in ... so I guess in those moments in particular are things that really call me to the moment, to a sense of reverence and sacredness.

The notion of flourishing is not a radical or new theological vision. There are foundations for flourishing as a soteriological metaphor in scripture, doctrine and the magisterial document *Laudato Si'*.

In scripture, flourishing is communal (Jn 15) and assumes the interconnectedness of people and the ecosystem; it invites healing, restoration and renewal. References to the promise of flourishing are found in Hosea 14.3-7, where the love of God for Israel is upheld in a promise of flourishing. Israel will 'blossom like the lily' (v. 5) and 'the vine' (v. 7) and 'shall flourish like the

grain' (v. 7) (Hos. 14).² In the New Testament, the vocabulary of flourishing has largely disappeared but is implicit in the parallel concepts of fullness and abundance (Eph. 3.19–20; Jn 15; Jantzen 1999). The mission of Jesus presented in John 10.10 – 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' – provides a biblical vision of flourishing that rests in the offer of abundant life. This same imagery is present in *Laudato Si'*, where Pope Francis uses the notion of communion to present a vision of church and society where humanity is radically united with creation and interconnectedness is critical to prosperity and flourishing (LS: 66–7).

Recovering the subjectivity of women

The promise of flourishing, healing and wholeness in body and Spirit is present in scripture and Catholic doctrine. In magisterial theology and ecclesiology, however, the symbolisms of divine father, divine son and almighty lord and saviour justify and strengthen the locus of male normativity and clericalism. The absence of God as Spirit and the continued opposition to the use of inclusive language in ecclesial discourses, including catechesis, liturgy, prayers and the lectionary, can limit the ways of knowing available to women. Yet in their narratives women find other ways to know God and flourish. For instance, Libby does not believe in a male 'all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing being' and maintains, as follows:

I no longer believe in God the father, God the son. I probably do believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe that there is some kind of force of goodness, a spirit of goodness ... There is a force of goodness, of creation, of love that exists separately from the interactions of people and that exists in the universe. I think part of our journey is to try to align ourselves more with that force and tap into that force. That is how I see God, rather than God being an entity. It's a bit like the force in Star Wars, I guess.

In the case of Audrey, a positive experience of encounter with an 'unknowable' divinity during a tsunami led her to disaffiliate from Catholicism when she could no longer reconcile a corrupt institutional, masculine God with what she encountered:

² Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of Biblica.

I had an experience when my partner and I were caught up in a tsunami and it was a life-threatening situation, and I had a very – and this actually might have kind of been like part of the final chapter of the decline into being a non-Catholic ... We had to run from a wave and we got caught up and it was pretty devastating, and saw some pretty horrendous things, but in the moment of being caught ... and seeing this huge wave coming towards me and, you know, a car and galvanized iron, and feeling so small and insignificant and like I was going to die and it just – I think after that moment, if what I thought I knew – if I thought I knew what God was, I had to completely, really rework it from that moment on, because it was this – the force of nature and the terrifying beauty and how powerful it was really, like, elevated me to this level of going, you know, there's something unknowable out there and maybe I thought I knew what it was or maybe this person that I was speaking to was it, but there's something deeper. And I actually just have to find the time to reflect on that and spend time in nature to really answer some of the questions that I have. But at this point for me, it's unknowable. The only way I can describe it is just this feeling, this presence and this feeling.

Listening carefully to women's stories and ways of knowing discloses the alternative theological symbolic of flourishing.

Throughout the chronicle of Christianity, women have been retrieving alternative imagery and visions of church from scripture and tradition in order to speak and name the divine and their own subjectivity. Among the long genealogy of women transcending cultural norms and sharing their theologies are Mary of Magdalene, who shared the news of Jesus's resurrection (Jn 20.18), the medieval mystic abbess and Doctor of the Church Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and the Beguine Marguerite Porete who was burnt at the stake in 1310 for writing about God in the vernacular. Even though there is a devaluation of women's voices, each generation of Catholic women has continued to speak and write theologies. This long *herstory* and genealogy of women's theologies sit on the margins of official Catholicism. The tactic is being employed by participants to enhance their faith experience and manage kyriarchal expectations and oppressions. Together the *herstories* of Gen X women and the collective repository of women's theologies are subjugated knowledge, which continue to be both disruptive and constructive.

Feminist scholarship highlights the importance of finding, recovering and telling the long *herstory* of women who have persisted or resisted. Carol P. Christ writes,

In conscious-raising groups, in conversation, and in study, women are engaged in the immensely important and exciting task of recovering and discovering

the shapes and contours of our own experience. We tell each other stories that have never been told before, stories utterly unlike stories we have learned from the culture. Finding our speech and opening our ears to hear, we are no longer forced to speak the tongues of madwomen, the tongues of ecstasy, the language of silence. (Christ 1992: 230)

The feminist ecclesial imaginary proposed here is grounded in the recovery and retelling of women's stories as the basis of church. This re-storying is central to the ongoing task of recovering women's subjectivity and using women's experiences to building new expressions and ideas of church. As the site and locus of women 'being church' and flourishing, the ecclesial imaginary is reimaged in women's *herstories* of the divine.

A chain of memory

Gen X women's *herstories* form part of a chain of memory that is essential to the re-storying and re-imagining of ecclesial spaces. As they tell their stories of lived Catholicism, participants express how they find Christ not just in Catholic sacramental rituals but in the everyday. For example, Kim walks a spiral with her family, does Tarot and her Rosary. Grace sits in nature. Nanette muses, 'I feel that I have a personal relationship with God where I can have that sense of reflecting on how I'm going with life and what I might need to do differently, without necessarily needing a sacrament to provide that structure.' Prudence explains,

I am a busy mother ... but there has been this practice of devotion ... it is ongoing ... you're doing the washing; you're hanging the clothes out on the line all that sort of stuff. ... While I am on my own, I am engaging in some way in some form of prayer ... I will pop down to the church for fifteen minutes of mental prayer ... when I can't go to the church I'll go for a walk. That is my mental prayer time.

Finding God in these small moments is central to women's sense of flourishing.

Several participants recount an imaginary of the divine using the theism 'God who is'. Participant's imaginings of 'God who is' sit in opposition to authoritarian magisterial discourse, which uses kyriarchal and gendered stereotypes of a male God and Christ. Several participants share their belief or perception of 'God who is', present and active in humanity and in creation through various powerful metaphors and figures of speech. For example, Prudence says the following: 'Well on the one hand you've got Michelangelo's God and the creation of Adam – go figure. The ... God is ... Don't let me say pantheism but there is that seeing

that I have [experienced] ... I tell you God existed. Nature. That presence, that amazement, that wonder. That astonishing presence.' Nanette claims God as 'the divine mystery, the transcendent, the light in the world, something that is close to us but bigger, so much bigger than anything we can imagine.' Miriam declares, 'I would say [God is] more like an energy force. It's just that it's a power beyond me.' Lizbeth muses, 'A turning towards love. That's how I experience the divine.' Martha deliberates, 'A beam of light or a circle of light. A force rather than a body so that's what I think God is.'

The mystical way of God expressed by participants brings to mind the theology and language of the medieval mystics. Grace explains how one such mystic, Julian of Norwich, helped her develop her understanding of God. I recounted the story of Grace's encounter with a 'powerful woman' spirit in Chapter 5. When I asked who God was for her, Grace asserts, 'God is kind of a soul friend ... beyond religion. God is those moments where I used to get up early and sit and watch the sunrise ... and sit in the face of beauty ... God is in the beauty of creation around me and in me.' Responding to a question about how she came to know God in this way, Grace reflects as follows:

I encountered Julian of Norwich who wrote about God as mother and father and the feminine Christ, and it blew my mind. And it took me back to that experience of that powerful woman after confession that day and the beautiful story of Kwan Yin, who's powerful, who chose not to become a Buddha, because her role was to hear the cries of the world ... At the time [of the encounter] my connection to God was Mary. But it could have been the breath of the Holy Spirit, which is feminine, Sophia.

Fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich writes of God as 'mother-love' who births humanity and leads them to never-ending joy and eternal life.

In their narratives participants reject the notion of the magisterium as the sole repository of truth and instead prioritize the authority of women through a religious chain of memory. Several participants speak of female role models, relating stories of how they use other women's interpretive adjustments as sources of inspiration and encouragement. These include aunts, mothers, grandmothers, nuns and women from the scriptures and history such as Julian of Norwich, Saint Mary MacKillop, Dorothy Day and Mary, the mother of Jesus. For instance, Patricia retains a strong Catholic identity. When asked who influenced her participation, she reflects,

Mum's approach was always pretty critical. She was always pretty open about what she thought the shortcomings were ... I do have that distinct memory of

her walking out of the church one Mother's Day Mass, when everyone else's mum was there ... the priest had said something essentially about women giving way to their husbands or some stupid cliché about motherhood that she found offensive ... coming from someone with no idea.

She then says the following:

Well, [my Catholic identity] it's overwhelmingly a cultural thing. It's a kind of a fealty of some sort I think, to my grandmothers chiefly who were very, very strong believers ... It's a set of rituals that are meaningful to me as something that has been handed down and repeated through my family ... that sense of constancy over time that gives them meaning beyond whether or not you actually you believe in the theory behind it.

Kim also draws on the strength of her matrilineal relationship when she cites her mother and grandmother as her greatest faith influence and describes how she draws on their strength and optimism:

I definitely got my faith from those women ... And it's the same thing. It's just I don't go to a physical church ... But the faith ... it's separate to the Catholic Church ... Lived faith ... It was just always there ... there was this overarching sense of there was something else other than us and it just required faith. My grandmother had nothing ... She was in the middle of the bush. She had five kids. She'd lost five of her siblings and she'd lost her mum. But she would put on a beautiful linen tablecloth and the butter would be in a dish and she'd look out the window and the five cockatoos would be in the tree and then she would go to Mass every Sunday ... It was like the beauty and the reverence, and the faith were all lived and interlinked. Like the beauty of Christ was in the cockatoos, it was in the linen tablecloth ... Christ in the flowers and the cockatoos and the linen tablecloth and serving others are all the same things.

Luanne, who was rejected from her parish community because she is divorced and lesbian, has developed a feminist hagiography of Saint Mary MacKillop as a source of hope and solidarity:

[Mary MacKillop] didn't really put up with a lot ... she challenged and ... when she felt like she knew that something was right, she really stood her ground. And I think that is something that I have resonated with. And you know she was excommunicated for it but still maintained her faith ... I think that story was something that I sort of eventually hooked into in terms of my own story. That it doesn't matter if I don't belong in a formal sense to the Catholic Church. That doesn't mean that my faith goes anywhere. It doesn't mean that my God goes anywhere.

A genealogy of women is fundamental to both the building of an ecclesial imaginary and the discovery of spaces in which women can experience an *ekklēsia* of flourishing and togetherness away from the eviscerating culture of the masculinist Church.

Communities of change: Women-Church

In response to kyriarchal and clerical structures within Catholicism, various feminist approaches to ecclesiology have developed. While some approaches seek to undermine kyriarchal structures and advocate for change and reform, others work to create intentional ecumenical communities where women can meet in solidarity and empowerment. Pioneering feminist theologians Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether reflect extensively on the ecclesiology of these intentional communities from which the Women-Church movement developed.³

The feminist Women-Church ecclesiologies which developed through the 1980s and 1990s claim women's experiences as meaningful sources in self-understanding and, accordingly, appeal for ecclesial imagery to be supportive of women's ministries and lives being affirmed and celebrated. One conception of Women-Church finds its basis in the work of Catholic feminist liberation theologian Radford Ruether (1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1991, 2005). Radford Ruether (1985) recognized the official Catholic Church as an historical institution deeply marred by clericalism and patriarchy. She called for the Catholic Church to be in a process of liberation that involves the dismantling of patriarchal and clerical power structures that prevent women from full participation in Church life (Radford Ruether 1985, 1991).

Radford Ruether (1991) understood the Women-Church movement, a collective grounded in the experience and *praxis* of 'women as the church', as the first step in the liberating process. In the spirit of liberation theology, Radford Ruether's conception of Women-Church was based on church as a rediscovery, renewal and expansion of the foundational insights of Christianity. The ideal that the Church can be transformed from the communal experience of a feminist collective finds its basis in two conflicting notions of church: (1) church as a male-centred and inherently patriarchal socio-historical construction

³ At a conference in 1981, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza introduced the term *ekklēsia gynaiḱōn*, which was subsequently translated into English by liturgist Diann Neu as 'Women-Church' (Hunt 2006).

and (2) church as the redemptive Spirit-filled sect created by Jesus and his early disciples as a renewal movement within Judaism (Radford Ruether 1985). Radford Ruether proposed that 'the church cannot be defined only as historical institution or only as spirit-filled community' (Radford Ruether 1985: 32–5). Church, understood in its duality, she explained, undermines and interrupts the current clerical expression of the Church as a replication of the apostolic church structure established by Jesus Christ and therefore as the sole transmitter of redemption (Radford Ruether 1985). As an inherently patriarchal socio-historical construction, the Church's clerical structure exists as a dialectical interaction between historical encounters and the experience of the Spirit. Women-Church, Radford Ruether explained, through a ministry of a discipleship of equals, can legitimately reappropriate the liturgical, theological and administrative functions of church and reclaim church as a community of liberation (Radford Ruether 2005).

Through her scholarship, Radford Ruether challenged women to form Women-Church communities to implement a vision of liberation and recover and reclaim Christian tradition and scriptures that have been silenced by the magisterium, in part due to the oppression of women. Radford Ruether (2005) conceived Women-Church as a series of egalitarian, Spirit-filled communities, which draw on the gifts and skills of all members to maintain and fulfil the plurality of liturgical, administrative and ministerial needs. Women-Church thus conceived serves a two-fold function: (1) to provide women with a safe place to be supported and nurtured and (2) to be a transitional community that transforms the Catholic Church by their conscience raising and political action.

The Women-Church movement as envisioned by Radford Ruether sits in stark contrast to magisterial ecclesiology, which sanctifies and mobilizes kyriarchal clerical power. Yet even as Radford Ruether presented, envisaged and named Women-Church communities as feminist spaces where women can meet, worship and work together for change, she understood transformation from masculinist, kyriarchal theologies to occur in the critique and reconstruction of structures of church. Understanding Women-Church as a transformative community of the Catholic Church is problematic. Even if kyriarchal ecclesial structures in Catholicism are reconstructed, the underlying ecclesiology and soteriology on which they are based remains active (Jantzen 1995a). In her feminist ecclesiological writing, Catholic feminist liberation theologian and biblical scholar Schüssler Fiorenza developed Women-Church as hermeneutical process and imaginary through which radical equality and liberation can be realized.

A sociopolitical imaginary: The *congress/* *ekklēsia/kosmopolis* of wo/men

Since the 1980s, Schüssler Fiorenza has developed and elaborated on the phrase *ekklēsia of wo/men*, as the starting point and central theological concept of her feminist ecclesiology. Unlike Radford Ruether, for whom the mission of Women-Church was influencing, and ultimately transforming, the Catholic Church and society, Schüssler Fiorenza visioned Women-Church as a radical, democratic feminist space, an *ekklēsia of wo/men*, developed from a new socioculture imaginary.

The term *ekklēsia of wo/men* points to a variety of movements and strategies that seek to dismantle and deconstruct male-centred oppressive religious-theological structures by ‘reconstructing the religious heritage and theological voice of women’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990: 318). In early Christian literature, *ekklēsia* referred to a community of believers who promoted a radical democratic self-understanding of community where all people shared equal rights to full participation. In this usage, *ekklēsia* is more a civil-political concept than a religious ideal (Schüssler Fiorenza 2002, 2009). Contemporary women are marginalized within the official, kyriarchal Catholic Church with no equal rights to full participation. Schüssler Fiorenza (2002) contended that she uses the untranslated *ekklēsia* to name the irony and reality of women’s exclusion and articulate a radical democratic ethos to challenge the consciousness of a male-centred, hierarchically ordered church and society.

To resist the use of *ekklēsia of wo/men* as an exclusive or essentialist space, Schüssler Fiorenza used the inclusive and generic term *wo/man*. The use of *wo/men* explicitly challenges the use of male terms as both generic and gender-specific and deliberately invites men to ‘think twice’ and adjudicate if they are included (Schüssler Fiorenza 2002). *Wo/men* signifies that there is no unified essence or feminine quality that defines ‘woman.’ Indeed, as Schüssler Fiorenza (2016) clarified, *wo/men* are not the same; they are fractured and transformed by structures of oppression.

In practical terms, Schüssler Fiorenza’s notion of *ekklēsia of wo/men* sought to focus on *wo/men* being visible as church in a manner that counteracts the exclusion of their theological and democratic voice. It aimed to create a space for *wo/men* to join in solidarity with each other and harness the power of religion as an emancipatory force (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016).

The *ekklēsia of wo/men* is therefore not just a liturgical or ritual gathering of wo/men; it provides a theological source of hope for re-imagining and seeking. It can be understood as a realization of the discipleship of equals, the promise of the *basileia* or the kingdom of God, 'God's intended world of well-being for all' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990: 331). Thus, the goal of the *ekklēsia of wo/men* is not a replacement for the kyriarchal Church or a movement set apart from secular feminism. The *ekklēsia of wo/men* strives to substitute patriarchal institutional ecclesial power with a different, liberating *praxis* that regenerates the kyriarchal Church into a discipleship of equals (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990).

Over time, Schüssler Fiorenza's early vision of an *ekklēsia of wo/men* has grown and expanded. In her most recent analysis which extended her earlier ideas Schüssler Fiorenza (2016) proposed a *congress/ekklēsia/kosmopolis of wo/men* as a sociocultural emancipatory imaginary, a vision that extends beyond church. The *congress/ekklēsia/kosmopolis of wo/men* envisages and names the radical, democratic feminist space in neoliberal globalization where diverse religious and secular wo/men's movements can meet and work together 'for change and transformation in both society and religion' (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016: 118). Within a *congress/ekklēsia/kosmopolis of wo/men*, Schüssler Fiorenza proposed:

The Divine image is neither male nor female, white nor black, rich nor poor, but multicolored, multigendered, and more. As a richly gifted people, the *ekklēsia of wo/men* acts in the name of the world-community, the *kosmopolis*, in which religious, racial, class, and heterosexual markers no longer signify and legitimate status differences and relations of kyriarchal domination and subordination. As a pilgrim people, the *ekklēsia of wo/men* may fail repeatedly but continues to struggle, to live in fullness, and to realize its calling to be the radical democratic cosmopolitan 'democracy to come'. Such an understanding of the *ekklēsia in the kosmopolis of wo/men* as a community of 'friends in struggle' envisions society and religion as a reciprocal community of support, a dynamic alliance of equals. (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016: 115)

The *congress/ekklēsia/kosmopolis of wo/men* is therefore at once an imagined and sociopolitical historical reality. It functions concurrently as an envisaged Women-Church community where all wo/men can be called to share their gifts and talents, and flourish, and a feminist political alterity where so-called secular and religious feminisms can converge. Such critical imagining is necessary, especially for women.

Women-Church movements in Australia

The 1970s through to the 1990s were a dynamic time for feminism, religion, and theologies in Australia as women in and around the Christian churches built on the successes of the secular second-wave women's movement. One of the earliest Australian church-based feminist groups, *Christian Women Concerned*, was formed in 1968. *Christian Women Concerned* drew its membership from across several different Christian denominations. They published a magazine, *Magdalene* (1973–87), which became a significant forum to articulate women's marginalization and oppression in patriarchal churches. The public activism of this group led to the founding of the *Commission on the status of Women of the Australia Council of Churches* in 1973, which initiated an upsurge in feminist activism in Christian churches in Australia (McPhillips 2016, 2019).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Christian women formed church-based social movements to tackle issues around inclusive liturgical language, the ordination of women, women's inclusion in leadership positions and theological education. Groups included *Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW)*; *Sydney Women-Church*; *WATAC Inc.*;⁴ *Feminists in the Uniting Church (FUN)*; and the *Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW)*. The genealogy of these groups is significant in this book's imagining of ecclesial spaces where women can flourish.

When the Women-Church movement was founded, its goal was not to establish an institution apart from the official Catholic Church or a new feminist religion. In Australia, beginning in the 1980s, women started to gather in Women-Church communities to nurture and sustain each other with the intention of fostering women who had been ignored or undervalued (Scholl 1988). In April 1985, a Women-Church community was established in Sydney to provide support and community for women who were interested in feminism, religion and spirituality (McPhillips 1994; White 2007). Originally named *A Conversation on Women and Religion*, the group adopted the name *Sydney Women-Church* in 1987. Formed without ties to any religious organization or denominational structure, the group was a liberating space for women who had negative experiences in patriarchal churches. The sharing of life stories and ritualized experiences gave the group a sense of community and identity. *Sydney Women-Church*, however, was not without internal conflict, and tensions eventually developed as the group explored how to create emancipatory spaces (McPhillips 1994). Erin White (2007) maintains that unease grew from different

⁴ Named WATAC for 'women and the Australian Church' (Moore 2007).

conceptions of the group's purpose. While some women viewed the group as a vehicle for reform, for others it was about self-education and freedom of expression. *Sydney Women-Church* was disbanded in 1997. The journal associated with the group, *Women-Church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, continued to be published until 2007 (White 2007).

Discussions that would lead to the formation of *WATAC Inc.* began in 1982 when representatives of Catholic religious orders met with Catholic bishops to discuss raising awareness of issues surrounding women in Catholicism. In 1984, a national committee was formed to gather information regarding the role of women in the Catholic Church (Madigan 2021; Moore 2007). After a national conference in 1988 that tabled many issues of concern, a formal organizational structure was established, and *WATAC Inc.* was incorporated in New South Wales (Moore 2007). Although *WATAC Inc.* has always been ecumenical, much of its activity and activism centred on bridging the divide between women and the official Catholic Church.

Through the 1990s, the struggle against sexism in church structures and theologies gathered momentum as feminist theologies developed and the magisterium rejected the ordination of women. During this time, *WATAC Inc.* worked to raise consciousness on Christian feminist issues through education and the dissemination of information in locally based groups, conferences, annual luncheons and the publication *WATAC News* (Moore 2007). From 2000 to 2018, *WATAC Inc.* organized a *Women and Inter-Faith Forum* for senior high school students (Moore 2007). By 2019, however, *WATAC Inc.* faced possible disbandment as falling donations and the failure to attract younger women as members caused financial difficulties.

Growing division

Feminist ecclesial spaces and women's movements are places where women can potentially find each other, celebrate their stories and flourish. Women-Church ecclesiologies present one way for women to contest kyriarchal church structures and vision alternative ecclesial spaces. Gen X women entered adulthood in the 1980s and 1990s, however, tended not to take part in feminist Women-Church groups, such as *Sydney Women-Church* and *WATAC Inc.*, which were a source of hope and collective encouragement for previous generations of women. No participants mentioned *Sydney Women-Church*, *WATAC Inc.* or the Women-Church movement in their interviews. The lack of engagement of Gen X with

feminist Women-Church groups has been perceived by some earlier generations of women as 'disinterest' (Madigan 2021).

I argue that while the non-participation of younger generations in feminist Women-Church groups could be understood as 'disinterest', to represent the under involvement of Gen X in this way is too simplistic. I have discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 how the lure of kyriarchal ideology and the intrinsic rewards women receive for enacting the role of the 'good Catholic woman' operate alongside the criticism of feminism by recent papacies to make feminism problematic for a portion of Catholic women. Secular feminist discourses, a post-feminist backlash and generational differences have further impacted the participation of Gen X women in feminism and feminist Women-Church groups.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Baby Boomer and Builder⁵ women rebelled against societal norms and played a major role in the development of feminist and civil rights movements. Major improvements in women's sexual and material rights in secular society had a significant impact on Catholic women. Baby Boomer and Builder women mobilized into church-based, feminist, Women-Church movements. However, by the late 1990s to mid-2000s, neoliberal political agendas, falling levels of church attendance and a growing awareness of CPCSIA instigated a turn in the feminist politics of religion towards different forms of political engagement (McPhillips 2016). During this time, counter-hegemonic feminist movements emerged, which sought to promote neoliberal political agendas and reinforce traditional gender roles (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016). The dualistic, feminine identity movement of New Feminism developed and promoted complementarian and essentialist theologies supporting the subjectification of women by claiming women's subordination as essential, natural and preordained by God (Beattie 2006).

Taking place alongside the shift in feminist politics of religion in Australia was a growing discourse of generational contempt between Baby Boomer and Gen X feminists. Baby Boomer feminists lamented and criticized Gen X women for their lack of engagement in feminism (Summers 1993). In a similar way, the absence of younger generations of women in feminist Women-Church groups proved disappointing to the Baby Boomers who so enthusiastically generated them (Madigan 2021). Yet even though many women from Gen X distance

⁵ The generational cohort preceding the Baby Boomers. Defined here as the age grouping born between 1 January 1925 and 31 December 1945. Also known as the Silent Generation.

themselves from 'feminism' there is still widespread acceptance of feminist standpoints regarding gender issues.

It is important to note that most participants identified as feminist. Furthermore, even when participants distance themselves from the label 'feminist', they articulate support for the equality of men and women in the workplace, including equal pay for equal work. For example, when asked if she identifies with feminism Emma says 'no' and then reflects,

I guess [feminism] is to me that a bloke can't do anything for you. I am a woman and ... I am very independent ... but I am also not beyond a man holding a car door open for me ... But you know, [male and female employees] should be on the same pay ... if are doing the same jobs. Is that feminism? Or is that just expecting the right money for the right work? I don't look at that as feminism. But maybe it is.

In many ways, the current era of neoliberal political agendas and the growing popularity of conservative ecclesial movements in Catholicism have juxtaposed to reinforce traditional gender roles and make feminism unconvincing for some Catholic women. Despite this, even non-feminist Gen X women are aware of the issue of the marginalization of women. For instance, Prudence, Eleanor and Veronica express disdain for feminism yet understand and critique the limitations imposed on women in workplaces and Catholic settings.

New Feminism as a movement

In this study, a divide emerged between participants who strive for and embrace magisterial ideals and those who find them highly problematic. The distinction between each group lies in their self-identification with feminism. Participants who self-identify as feminists reject the understanding that God is male, refuse to accept kyriarchal doctrines and teachings and tend not to attend Mass regularly. The cohort of participants who do not identify as feminists are more likely to accept the limitations of magisterial teachings and tend to blame feminism for life difficulties they have experienced. For instance, Prudence describes feminism as 'dangerous', and Eleanor and Veronica explicitly attribute feminism for the breakdown of family life. Agatha asserts, 'I'm a feminist in the true sense of what it is to be feminine ... I'm not a feminist in terms of driving an agenda. Feminism to me means, exactly the Latin word like feminine ... it's soft as in touch, in heart, delicate ... motherhood is feminine.'

I previously explained in Chapter 5 how Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis declare any feminist claim for equality in Catholicism to be an imitation of male domination. Indeed, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Benedict XVI maintained, 'Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power' (Ratzinger 2004). I contend the papal-approved ideology of New Feminism has limited the reach of feminist theological work.

In Australia, women who align themselves with New Feminism are part of the rich diversity of Catholic women. Organizations and movements that reproduce the discourse of New Feminism are attracting a number of younger women to their conferences and events. For instance, *Sisterhood* is a national movement that seeks to support and empower women based on the magisterium's teaching on the value and dignity of womanhood. Since 2009, *Sisterhood* has reportedly held sold-out national conferences (Sisterhood National Catholic Women's Movement 2020). This is not unexpected. In a study of similar movements in the evangelical church, *Hillsong*, Marion Maddox (2013) proposes that women's groups that mix conservative religious teachings and gender complementarity with women's empowerment initially might seem out of step with society; however, their teachings on gender reproduce and intensify tensions inscribed in neoliberalism and the wider Australian culture.

Feminist theologies do not claim to speak for all women, and there are women who find fulfilment in New Feminism and more traditionalist forms of Catholicism. I argue, however, that New Feminism is not simply a more traditionalist form of Catholicism. Rather, I contend New Feminism is a misogynistic discourse and technology of harm implemented by the magisterium to monitor and control women using normalizing technologies. New Feminism reproduces and disseminates magisterial statements around femininity and gender giving legitimacy and recognizability to those who reproduce it. Furthermore, the discourse of New Feminism strategically engages feminism to limit women's agency and produce boundaries for women's self-understanding.

Church re-visioned in a feminist paradigm presents women with the opportunity to engage in embodied communities where sacramentality is lived and celebrated in women past and present living in the image of the divine. In contrast to groups that promote feminist theologies, New Feminism and other more conservative Catholic movements garnered official, institutional support. The co-opting of feminism by the magisterium in the rhetoric of New Feminism creates divides between women, which function to support women's subordination. Women's movements can either mirror kyriarchy and legitimate the status quo or articulate an alternative vision of church and consciously

deconstruct kyriarchal language and structures of domination, violence and injustice.

Contesting kyriarchy

Throughout the history of Christianity, malestream ecclesiologies have silenced women and excluded them from positions of authority and decision-making, including ordained ministries. Feminist ecclesiologies must therefore empower women to begin to construct theological meanings and authority. A contestation of the underlying kyriarchal power dynamics in official Catholicism is central to any re-visioned ecclesial imaginary. Scripture and Catholic tradition can be used either to encourage flourishing or to legitimate the status quo. Schüssler Fiorenza contends, 'The imagery of both worlds – the kyriarchal world of domination, violence, and injustice, on the one hand, and of a kyriarchy-free, divine world of well-being, justice, and love, on the other – is linguistically inscribed in holy scriptures and formative traditions' (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016: 121). A hermeneutic of critical questioning and imagining is required to enable transformation.

In a Foucauldian understanding of the dynamics of power-knowledge, even when new actions and engagements disrupt hegemonic discourses, material and structural inequalities that have become normative can continue to shape consciousness (Foucault 1980). Technologies of harm such as misogyny, gaslighting and breadcrumbing can be used to preserve inaction and retain the status quo. Indeed, gender is embedded and constituted in social, religious and political sites. Even when subjugated peoples wrest legitimacy from an existing apparatus, creating new alliances between bodies, they can still be impacted by hegemonic power relations (Butler 2018). As Audre Lorde asserts, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (Lorde 2007: 105). Even when kyriarchal ecclesial structures are reviewed and deconstructed, the fundamental imaginary and soteriology on which they are established can continue to be present and active.

Within and alongside any envisioned, alternative ecclesial imaginary radical democratic ecclesial spaces are needed that are not just as places to 'be church', but also places for articulating, developing and debating feminist theories and theologies. What is required is a feminist ecclesial imaginary that is at once an ecclesial space and a sociopolitical movement that consciously rejects and

contests kyriarchy. Ecclesial communities, which are built on an imaginary of natality and a theology of flourishing, have the potential to be places of flourishing for women. Gen X women are participating in a chain of feminist memory, following a line of faith-filled Christian women, sharing a rich *herstory* of resisting hegemonic theologies and social practices towards a more just and equitable future.

Emerging feminist spaces

Women who are deeply committed to Christianity seek spaces where they can affirm and live out their faith in community. A few participants mention how being part of a feminist or women's movement enables them to make sense of their experiences of Catholicism. For instance, Helen has sought out a women's movement as an alternative to a parish community. Nanette credits the women in her women's circle with helping her make sense of how she can remain connected with her faith, parish community and Catholic identity:

Talking to people in the [women's] circle, hearing from [them] things like, 'I can't do it anymore. I need to leave. I've had enough', and trying to sort of listen, and listening to people that have heard her say that, knowing how much of a faithful person she is, that's been a more recent avenue of reflection for me in a sense of going, 'Well, that seems way out there for me, but maybe that's part of my journey', that sort of thing. So those women in particular, most recently, I guess, have really helped me find another way, I guess, of being connected.

Luanne remains involved with the Catholic Church through the school where she teaches. She describes how she engages with the feminist reform group *Voices of Faith* to make sense of her experiences: 'I follow them on Facebook. I've read a lot of their work and a lot of what they're doing, which is really incredible stuff ... I've got a few pages on my Facebook that I follow and read the articles ... I watch the videos and stuff'. In Australia and globally, younger generations of Catholic women, including Gen X, have begun to join together and speak out regarding women's equality and inclusion in the Catholic Church (McEwan and Gemmell 2021; McPhillips and McEwan 2020). Their involvement is part of an emerging new wave of feminist activist movements.

The public visibility of popular feminism, postfeminist sensibility and neoliberal feminism have revitalized feminist discourses (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020). The presence of feminist hashtag movements on social media

has had a profound effect on discourse around women's experiences of sexual abuse, marginalization and discrimination (Rottenberg 2019). The #MeToo movement surged in 2017 when actor Alyssa Milano⁶ used the hashtag on *Twitter* to expose the sexual harassment and abuse of women in the entertainment industry. Shortly after, the hashtags #ChurchToo and #NunsToo began to be used alongside #MeToo on social media platforms to speak out about the abuse, sexual violence and oppression of women in official Catholicism (Colwell and Johnson 2020; McPhillips 2019). The #MeToo, #ChurchToo and #NunsToo movements have had a global impact in reducing the stigma around abuse and highlighting the commonality of experiences of discrimination and harassment in Catholic ecclesial spaces.

New activist groups have formed, and existing groups have been revitalized as renewed energy for solidarity and collaboration among Catholic women is being generated. *Voices of Faith* is an initiative and international network that operates to empower Catholic women into leadership roles in the Catholic Church (Voices of Faith 2022). Since its inception, *Voices of Faith* has been inspiring women across the world to action against the issue of sexual violence and the marginalization of women in Catholicism. In a speech given in Rome at an event run by *Voices of Faith* on International Women's Day 2018, Mary McAleese claimed:

Failure to include women as equals has deprived the Church of fresh and innovative discernment ... It has kept Christ out and bigotry in. It has left the Church flapping about awkwardly on one wing when God gave it two. We are entitled to hold our Church leaders to account for this and other egregious abuses of institutional power and we will insist on our right to do so no matter how many official doors are closed to us. (McAleese 2018)

Shortly after, in 2019, the German grassroots movement *Maria 2.0* was formed when Catholic women, who felt that for too long, they had been marginalized within their local parish community, called a church 'strike'. *Maria 2.0* is demanding a gender-equitable church, the ordination of women and actions to address the crisis of CPCSA (Strack 2020). The network *Catholic Women Speak* works together creating actual and virtual spaces for dialogue, collaboration and theological reflection among women who choose to continue to engage with official Catholicism in the worldwide Church (Catholic Women Speak 2020). The *Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network (FLTN)*, a project of *WATER*

⁶ The phrase was originally used by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 (Colwell and Johnson 2020).

(Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual), is an alliance of feminist scholars, ministers and activists that collaborate beyond boundaries set by denomination, tradition, academic affiliation and race or ethnicity. For twenty-five years, the group has provided a forum for discussion and has engaged in collaborative work with women and other feminist groups around the world (WATER 2024). In 2019–20, more than forty Catholic women's groups joined together to form a global *Catholic Women's Council (CWC)*, which is calling for the dignity and equality of women and girls to be acknowledged in Catholicism (CWC 2021).

The Australian organization *WATAC Inc.* is part of the CWC alliance and continues to be active in modelling new ways to be church (WATAC 2020). On International Women's Day 2021, *WATAC Inc.*, in partnership with *The Grail in Australia*,⁷ launched a podcast *Australian Women Preach*. The *Australian Women Preach* podcast provides a platform for women who have a vocational call to preach (Australian Women Preach 2021; McEwan and Gemmell 2021). For Catholic women who are disillusioned and frustrated with the marginalization of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, new connections with local and international Catholic and ecumenical feminist reform movements are providing a place outside rigid ecclesiastical structures where women's stories can be shared and heard.

The recent upsurge of Catholic feminist action and activism in Australia and across the world is highly significant. There is a growing awareness among Gen X and younger generations of Catholic women of the need to contest the kyriarchal ideologies of neoliberalism and New Feminism. For instance, Audrey highlights,

[Feminism] means gender equality. It means finding equality, men and women being treated the same. Being paid the same for the same amount of work, being given the same opportunities. It means an end to gender-based violence, which is what most domestic violence is. It means an end to workplace harassment and the glass ceiling. It means an end to all of those things, and look, I'm not afraid of that word. It's been really hauled over the hot coals. A lot of younger women in particular don't like using it. I think people see it as a threat to their femininity if they seek to redress inequality.

As I have described earlier in this chapter, women are seeking Christian faith communities that encourage and enable flourishing. In ecclesiology, to flourish

⁷ The Grail in Australia is part of an international movement and community of women grounded in the Christian faith and challenged by the teachings of Jesus (Grail Australia 2020).

implies a community grounded on the interconnectedness of relationships between God, humanity and the earth. Church is located and told in the stories of creation and is embodied in women's lives. Herein, all women must be invited into ecclesial communities of justice, well-being and flourishing, regardless of their identification with feminism or their gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, generation or other identity; the divine is recognized in the theism 'God who is'.

Ecclesial communities, however, cannot just be places to 'be church'. They must work actively to critique and oppose the ideologies of neoliberalism and New Feminism that prevent women flourishing. Moreover, they must actively challenge and disrupt the idea of Catholicism as a magisterial tradition passed down from generation to generation through the theologies and ecclesiologies of men. Working together as a sociocultural emancipatory imaginary ecclesial communities can build upon the *herstories* of women past and present, mobilizing existing feminist theological traditions and developing and articulating new ones to encourage and empower women.

I began this book by highlighting that the Catholic Church is a place of ambiguity and struggle for women. I contend that the implicit goal of magisterium and official Catholic ecclesiology and theology is to coerce women towards a certain type of personhood wherein suffering is part of a pedagogy of diminishment, which is conceived necessary for salvation in Christ. As an alternative, I propose a feminist ecclesiology grounded in a theology of flourishing and an imaginary of natality. Herein, the biblical promise of wholeness and flourishing in body and Spirit is key. A feminist ecclesiology reimagined is both contained and produced in the genealogy of women's *herstories* of flourishing. Feminist ecclesial spaces are not simply places to 'be church'. They are radical democratic spaces of sociopolitical alterity where women can work together to develop, articulate and proclaim a theological hermeneutic of hope and justice.

Afterword

This investigation of women's identity and agency captures a significant moment in the Catholic Church. Collectively Catholic women are realizing the depth of their marginalization. Fed up with being controlled and regulated by an all-male kyriarchal episcopacy that has permitted the perpetration of an unprecedented level of sexual violence against children and adults, women are abandoning institutional practices, rituals and structures. Globally, women make up a majority of church attendees and are a significant source of unpaid volunteer labour in Catholic parishes and school communities. Without their active involvement, it is likely that Catholic organizations and communities will become unsustainable. Unless the balance shifts and the Catholic Church abandons its gendered ecclesiology and paradigms and is open to the contributions of women as valued equal partners, it risks the trend towards reduced involvement being extended to future generations of women. This would represent a substantial change, greatly impacting the future viability of the Catholic Church and services it provides.

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