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No justice for Margaret Farley and 'Just Love'

Jamie Manson | Jun. 4, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Only weeks after taking a broad swipe at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has returned to its more typical routine of taking aim at individual theologians.

The latest target is Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, professor emeritus of Christian ethics at Yale Divinity School, and her 2006 book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* [1].

On Monday morning, the CDF published a notification that states *Just Love* does not reflect the official teaching of the Magisterium and, therefore, "cannot be used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling or formation, or in ecumenical or interreligious dialogue."

As Farley herself said in her response to the notification, *Just Love* "was not intended to be an expression of current official Catholic teaching, nor was it aimed specifically against this teaching." The goal of this book was to engage discussion about issues in sexual ethics, knowing that fruitful discussion becomes possible only if critical questions are pressed.

It has become abundantly clear that, particularly in matters related to the pelvic zone, the hierarchy is not interesting in exploring questions or engaging in dialogue. That's a loss for the hierarchy, who would benefit greatly from a close reading of Farley's framework for sexual ethics. But their loss is the Catholic laity's gain, particularly those who have not yet been exposed to Farley's work.

As we learned from the 2005 censuring of Jesuit theologian Roger Haight for his book *Jesus Symbol of God* [2] and last autumn's condemnation of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God* [3], Roman Catholic bishops have a knack for garnering public interest in some of the most groundbreaking theological and ethical texts being written today.

In the interest of full disclosure, I mention that as a student at Yale Divinity School I had the honor of serving as Farley's research assistant for two years. In the decade since my graduation, she has been a mentor and friend. In recent years when I have taught sexual ethics on a college level, *Just Love* has been our textbook.

Just Love was not only a lifesaver to me as a professor, but a life-giver to our students who are part of a generation born into a society where sexual norms are in flux and the old sexual taboos are rapidly fading away.

Most young adults in the United States were raised in a culture saturated in sexual imagery and references. They did not grow up in a "village model" of society in which the community constructed and handed down moral norms. And, in most cases, young adults no longer find moral credibility in the church, especially its teachings on sexuality.

As a result, new generations are saddled with the overwhelming task of developing for themselves new norms for sexual ethics. Unfortunately, many find themselves adrift in a morally relative culture where often the only imperative seems to be: "What is good for you isn't necessarily good for me, but if it works for you, who I am to

judge?"

As my students searched for a basis for developing their sexual ethic, *Just Love* proved invaluable. Farley applies criteria for justice to sexual relationships and activities, offering readers a seven-point framework for evaluating whether a sexual relationship is true, loving and just.

The first two norms consider whether the relationship is harmful and whether both partners have freely consented to the relationship. The framework then asks whether the relationship is marked by mutual desire, trust and self-disclosure. Building on that is the norm of equality, which requires that both partners share an equality of power that in no way entails an unequal vulnerability, dependence or limitation of options.

The final three norms consider whether there is a true commitment, which Farley defines as a union marked "by knowing and being known, and loving and being loved." If there is commitment, the question must be asked whether the relationship fulfills the sixth norm of fruitfulness. That is, does the commitment bring about new life by nourishing other relationships and by providing goodness and beauty to the wider community?

Finally, Farley asks whether a relationship is marked by social justice. By social justice, she not only means justice between sexual partners, but respect for all persons in a community. For an individual relationship to be just, it must respect every person's needs for acceptance, well-being and spiritual safety.

Regrettably, the CDF gave no attention to Farley's framework, but instead plucked out statements, almost in a manner of proof-texting, to demonstrate her conflicts with the Magisterium.

There is a sad irony in CDF's limited approach to *Just Love*. If they had the resource of Farley's framework decades ago, they might have been able to stave off some of the sex abuse crisis before it became a full-blown plague. Seminaries would be healthier places today if part of the formation process included her lessons on equality, mutuality and commitment.

Perhaps most troubling in the CDF's notification was the claim that Farley has a "defective understanding of natural law." While Farley is clear from the outset that *Just Love* is not a book on official Roman Catholic sexual ethics, the book's overall aim and subject are deeply embedded in the best of our theological tradition. Throughout *Just Love*, she employs a natural law method, approaching ethical questions by looking at the reality of what it means to be human.

As one of thousands of students who read the hundreds of pages of Aquinas that Farley assigned, I know how important Thomas' thought is to her own work. Like Thomas, Farley presumed created reality is knowable, human beings have the capacity to understand reality, and divine revelation assists us in making reality knowable.

Farley also understands that a natural law method continually requires a "reality check" to correct or expand human meaning. Reality checks are essential to discovering more adequate answers to our unfolding questions about human life, relationships and purpose. Many of those who read Farley's book and then confer with the CDF's notification will quickly note how deeply in need of a reality check the hierarchy is.

Farley explains in the preface of *Just Love* that she "never intended or planned to write a book on sexual ethics." She didn't even plan to teach a course on the subject. A world-renowned scholar, Farley is actually as well known for her work in medical ethics and bioethics.

But decades of teaching future ministers, scholars and nonprofit leaders in the vast ecumenical setting of Yale Divinity School led her to realize how urgent the need was for a framework for sexual ethics.

While Farley was sought out by divinity students and doctoral candidates for her vast knowledge of ethics and theology, many were equally drawn in by her remarkable gift of presence. She listened deeply to the students who came to her door and strove to "meet them where they are." Often her office hours would become as much pastoral counseling sessions as they were meetings for academic advising.

It was this level of presence to and engagement with her students' questions and concerns that motivated Margaret to develop *Just Love*, which is the product of decades of teaching, studying and listening.

Margaret labored over *Just Love*for more than a decade, and I know with certainty that her deepest hope was that the book would help people through their lives -- *not* turn them against the church. In fact, I am one among many Catholic women and men who actually stayed Catholic because she taught us what is most deeply true and beautiful about our tradition. I still refer often to the notes I took during my tutorials with her on the 20th-century Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Yves Congar and Bernard Lonergan.

Margaret helped many of her Catholic students deepen their love for the church's intellectual and sacramental life. Those lessons have continually offered me solace as I have watched the hierarchy undermine its own tradition by adopting an increasingly anti-intellectual, fundamentalist relationship to its doctrines of sexuality.

The CDF targeted Farley because she is a woman religious and, therefore, a member of the Institute of Consecrated Life. The notification is further evidence that the Vatican distrusts any attempt by a woman religious to ask theological questions and explore ethical ideas, regardless of how deeply grounded these questions and explorations are in a sister's work and service to the church.

Farley, like the rest of the LCWR, is being penalized for taking human suffering seriously. Like women religious who work among the poor, broken and marginalized, Farley takes a compassionate, unflinching look at the human reality behind our moral theology and seeks to address the most pressing pastoral needs of those engaged in intimate relationships.

True to the natural law method, Farley recognizes that as human understandings of sexuality evolve, new questions must be asked. As human beings continue to struggle with commitment, unjust relationships and conflicting sexual desires, new insights must be sought. It is only by asking new questions and seeking new insights that we can create a sexual ethic that will lead to human flourishing and greater spiritual wholeness.

It is tragic that the bishops cannot accept the spirit in which Margaret Farley wrote *Just Love*. The book addresses moral questions that affect not only all members of the faithful, but the ethical dilemmas that affect members of the hierarchy themselves.

If members of the CDF had the courage to read book with an open, honest understanding of their own human reality, they might recognize that Farley's intention was not sow seeds of dissent, but to offer the fruits of love and justice to those seeking a fuller integration of their bodies and spirits.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/Just-Love-Framework-Christian-Sexual/dp/0826429246/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1338816825&sr=8-1
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Symbol-God-Roger-Haight/dp/1570753113
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