The Social Witness and Theo-political Imagination of the Movements:
Creating a New Social Space as a Challenge to Catholic Social Thought

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This volume’s essays suggest significant ways in which social movements contribute to Catholic social thought beyond service as “carriers” of the tradition. Theopolitical imagination is often understood as the construal of “space-times” that challenge secular political realities or the status quo as historically contingent. Certainly lived and theoretical Catholic social thought are poised to do so as they summon and enact solidarity and forgiveness over reigning practices of exclusion and retribution. I wish to suggest here ways in which the witness of the movements challenges Catholic social thought itself at the levels of formulation and application.

In order to illustrate ways in which social movements can enlarge the tradition’s ethical presuppositions and methodologies, I draw upon two contemporary examples: the work of Jesuit Migration Service (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes) and the advocacy of women religious in the U.S. health care reform debate of 2010. Taken together these groups’ encounters suggest that despite its orientation to social dimensions of existence, Catholic social thought remains underattentive to ideologies and practices that shape agency. The manner in which agency gets constrained and expressed in these examples illuminates subtle and powerful dynamics that rights language and institutional analyses can miss. The theopolitical vision of the movements profiled herein also creates a new social space for a more robust exercise of conscientious discernment beyond narrow obedience, and it imagines collaborative modes of social Catholicism into being.

Agency Constrained and Expressed: Insights from Persons on the Move

Since the mid-1990’s, the Society of Jesus has identified migration as one of its five apostolic priorities worldwide. Jesuit Migration Service’s mission is “to achieve full respect for human rights and labor standards and improve the living conditions of migrant workers and their

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2 I am grateful to Judith Merkle and John Coleman for valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this text.

families...in their communities of origin, transit and destination.”

Founded in 2001, the organization’s Mexican branch attends to Central American and Mexican migrant flows, coordinating networks of social advocacy, educational institutions, churches, human rights centers, humanitarian aid and popular education and training efforts. One of its partner programs, the binational Kino Border Initiative (KBI) in Ambos Nogales (Nogales, Arizona, U.S. and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico), combines humanitarian assistance, formation, research and advocacy. During the KBI’s initial needs assessment phase, discussions with many individuals on both the Mexican and U.S. sides of the border alerted them to the particular vulnerability of women on the move. As a result, KBI opened a shelter for deported women and children in Nogales, Sonora (Casa Nazaret) as the initial dimension of its outreach. The initiative has also recently undertaken a Catholic Relief Services–funded investigation of sexual violence.

The grant’s objectives include ensuring migrant women have access to legal and psycho-social services in response to violence, and improving women’s capacity to exercise their rights. KBI also seeks to document incidences of violence against women migrants to inform and engage authorities, employers, and public opinion. In contrast to the largely gender-neutral approach dominant in Catholic social thought (and most policy debates) on migration, such sensitivities alert the tradition to the particular vulnerabilities women increasingly face.

Recent decades have witnessed the increasing feminization of global migration, with women now constituting half the international migrant population, and in some countries, 70-80%. As

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5 For information about the Kino Border Initiative’s programs, see http://www.kinoborderinitiative.org/en/about-us.html (accessed August 9, 2011).

6 Catholic Relief Services-Mexico grant proposal, “Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Northwestern Mexico,” June 1, 2010-May 30, 2012 duration, obtained from Sean Carroll, SJ, Executive Director, Kino Border Initiative.


8 In some cases this term may be misleading given that by 1960 women made up 47% of all female migrants, yet the aggregate stability hides regional trends of feminization. The independent manner in which women increasingly migrate (rather than as family dependents) has sharply increased in recent decades. See UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund, “Linking Population, poverty and Development; Migration: A World on the Move,” available at
is increasingly clear at Casa Nazaret, women on the move face particular threats, from assault by smugglers and officials, to abuse on the job, to manipulation in detention facilities. The majority of the estimated 1-2 million annual victims of human trafficking begin as economic migrants or refugees seeking “safer or more economically viable alternatives for themselves and their families.”

Migrant women crossing the Mexico-U.S. border face gender-specific risks: they are “[n]early three times more likely to die of exposure than men,” and more than 70% of women attempting to cross this border are sexually exploited en route. Given widespread shifts from manufacturing to service-dominated economies, the majority of migrant women who survive the journey work in informal and contingent contexts, with the flexibility of capital exerting “downward pressure” on conditions of employment. Policies and backlogs that prevent immigrant workers from maintaining family unity likewise treat them as economic units, rather than recognizing their full humanity as spouses, parents and children.

Conversations with migrant women reveal how factors underdeveloped in official Catholic social thought can heighten susceptibility to sexual misconduct on the move. Mexican anthropologist Olivia Ruiz Marrujo’s fieldwork indicates, for example, that women in southern Mexico regularly “refer to sexual relations with their partners as ‘cuando hace uso de mi’”—‘when


10 Such would-be migrants are often deceived by “persons whom they believed to be smugglers, employment contractors, or even friends or relatives; women and unaccompanied children face a heightened risk of trafficking with attendant sexual abuse and violence, and upon escape, further stigmatization “upon return to their communities of origin.” Mary DeLorey, “International Migration: Social, Economic and Humanitarian Considerations,” in And You Welcomed Me: Migration and Catholic Social Teaching, ed. Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 76.

11 Miguel De La Torre points out it is common practice for women preparing to make the crossing to use a method of birth control prior to the journey as they are more than likely to be sexually assaulted. De La Torre, Trails of Hope and Terror: Testimonies on Immigration (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 51.


14 In Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), I elaborate the gendered and familial dimensions of migration (chapter 3) and the limits of reigning ethical approaches that privilege autonomy (chapter 5).
he makes use of me,”” and local emergency rooms “attend daily to women who arrive unconscious” as a result of domestic violence. The pervasiveness of sexist attitudes (machismo, marianismo) and cultures of violence shape women’s and men’s expectations and behaviors in ways that heighten vulnerability. As a result, for example, “[a]n undocumented Central American woman for whom sexual relations has rarely, if ever, been consensual, may consider a coyote’s [smuggler’s] demand for sex, in exchange for assuring her ‘safe’ passage” expected behavior from a man. These widespread practices reflect social and cultural expressions of a reductive vision of (indigenous) women as means rather than ends.

By contrast, moral analysis too often continues to focus upon individual acts in isolation at the expense of enduring structures and ideologies that abet human rights violations. Concrete experiences encountered through migration ministries can help alert the tradition to these inadequate notions of agency that fail to account for such constraints. A migrant woman’s decisions to have sexual relations with another male migrant (or as is increasingly common, inject contraceptives) to ensure “safe” passage, “abandon” her children for better long-term prospects for them, work without documents or reside without authorization, occur within constrained social contexts. These means are not morally (or otherwise) desirable, but understanding the realities shaping these “choices” highlights the shortcomings of individualistic paradigms, absolutist categories and approaches that privilege autonomy or sexual purity.

Patterns of sexual exploitation and protracted family separation have also increased migrants’ vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Experiences via social movements and pastoral encounters reveal ways in which analyses of HIV/AIDS—which has also undergone “feminization”—remain similarly hindered by inattention to constraints on agency. Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure underscores this in her insistence that two viruses more dangerous than HIV enable its rapid spread among societies’ most vulnerable—sexism and global poverty. Partners in Health Founder Paul Farmer has shown how economic, political and cultural forces significantly shape the dynamics of HIV transmission. As he points out, young Haitian women driven into nonvoluntary sexual unions by abject poverty or the reality that half of Bombay’s sex workers were recruited through trickery or abduction “call into question facile notions of


16 Marrujo, 228.

17 Cynthia Crysdale notes that “To the degree that … group bias…or a quest for mere power distort [conditions for promoting life] … survival of the fittest means that some, literally, survive at the expense of others. Perhaps more profoundly, some claim personhood, meaning and self-value at the expense of others’ dignity.” Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, “Making a Way by Walking: Risk, Control and Emergent Probability,” Theoforum 39 (2008): 39-58 at 54.

18 For a discussion of how the experiences of women and feminist methodologies contest this dominant anthropology in terms of Catholic social teaching in particular, see Mary Elsbernd, “Authentic Human Living in Catholic Social Teachings: A Feminist Perspective,” Bijdragen, International Journal in Philosophy and Theology 64 (2003): 3-19.

He rightly laments, “there is something unfair about using personal agency as a basis for assigning blame while simultaneously denying those blamed the opportunity to exert agency in their lives.”

At the international Catholic ethics conference in Trento in 2010, Bishop Kevin Dowling echoed such analyses in light of his own accompaniment of economic migrants, namely women and their young children dying of AIDS in rusted zinc shacks near platinum mines in South Africa. He lamented, on the one hand, the structural injustices that conspire to force such (undocumented) economic refugees into what he termed “survival sex,” and, on the other hand, Church declarations that give the impression that HIV contraction results from free, sinful choices alone. “Where does one find in Church pronouncements a holistic awareness and systematic focus on the structural issues (economic, cultural and social) which affect the very possibility of making a free, moral choice or decision by the poor and vulnerable?” he pleaded. These concrete narratives challenge Catholic social thought to more adequately account for social forces that impact autonomy and subjectivity.

Such social realities highlight the inadequacy of an individualistic paradigm with undue emphasis on personal behavior for responding to HIV/AIDS as it affects women in particular, not unlike the criminalization of undocumented immigration, which often makes desperate family members the primary sites of enforcement. For example, since the majority of married women infected with HIV had no other partner than their husbands, mere exhortations to fidelity and monogamy do not protect women from infection. Punitive images of purveyors of disease remain far more common than images of homelessness, barriers to health care, absence of jobs or child care; alongside such images, the inflation of the apparent significance of personal choice also holds sway. In my own U.S. context, the bishops’ most recent joint response to the HIV/AIDS crisis remains their 1989 “Called to Compassion and Responsibility.” There the bishops’ articulation of obstacles to HIV prevention leads with (not insignificant) personal vices like self-abusive behavior (substance use) and sexual promiscuity. The bishops discuss gender complementarity to underscore Humanae vitae’s teaching and highlight virtues of sexual integrity and chastity. The social sin they address is the influence of a culture of self-gratification. As Julie Clague has reflected, members of the hierarchy and laity complicit in injustices on grounds of gender and sexual orientation reflect medieval manifestations of Catholicism that rather than a liberative (Vatican II) vision. Whereas the Catholic Church remains one of the largest providers of services to those affected by HIV/AIDS, and recent papal

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20 Ibid., 22.
21 Ibid., 28-9.
23 In fact, as Margaret Farley aptly suggests, a simple reiteration of moral rules for sexual behavior has sometimes served only to heighten the shame and stigma associated with AIDS and promote misplaced judgments on individuals and groups, ignoring the genuine requirements of justice and truth in sexual relationships. Margaret A. Farley, Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002): 10-11.
24 Farmer, 33.
interviews may augur changes on the horizon, its failure to sufficiently address (or repent from cooperation in) how sexism intersects with other unjust structures and ideologies hinders its witness.

Catholic social thought has addressed social sin in recent decades, yet its narrow construal in papal encyclicals fails to unmask the ideologies that facilitate pervasive rights violations (that threaten bodily integrity and health, in the case of the examples offered). In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reiterates Pope John Paul II’s primary understanding that “at the bottom of every situation of sin there is always the individual who sins,” since “in its true sense, sin is always an act of the person because it is the free act of an individual person and not properly speaking of a group or community.” John Paul II elaborates the scope and meaning of social sin over his corpus, yet the individual’s role in sustaining sinful structures remains primary. His theological circumscription of the category to underscore individual responsibility reflected in contemporary magisterial articulations constrains its value for uncovering the subtle social dynamics that impact personal agency, isolating acts and spheres of morality from contextual practices and assumptions.

The Medellín and Puebla analyses are more sensitive to the unconscious dimension of social sin and the impact unjust structures have on personal agency. The blindness produced by absolutizing human attitudes which the pope, at times, identifies holds relevance for an adequate understanding of the scope and responsibility for sin; such blindness can prevent recognition, since exploitative institutions and structures both are sustained by the appearance of legitimacy...

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27 I analyze John Paul II’s and Latin American theologians’ approaches to social sin in “Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences make Bad Neighbors,” Theological Studies 71.2 (June 2010): 410-36. Whereas social sin may not directly cause personal sin, it “creates an environment in which it becomes more difficult to make good choices,” heightening the tendency “present because of original sin to turn away from God.” Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., “Social Sin and Fundamental Option,” in Christian Freedom: Essays by the Faculty of the Saint Meinrad School of Theology, ed. Clayton N. Jefford (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 131–43 at 142.


29 In Sollicitudo rei socialis and Evangelium vitae John Paul II identifies nonvoluntary elements which remain in tension with his significant emphasis on personal responsibility but hold potential for expanding beyond a derivative notion of social sin: the “all-consuming desire for profit” and “the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one’s will upon others” to which nations and blocs are prone, imperialistic ideologies and “the almost automatic operation of economic and political institutions;” the “eclipse of the sense of God and of man [that] inevitably leads to a practical materialism, individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism,” and the “darkening of the human conscience both individually and in society—a confusion about good and evil that encourages the culture of death and consolidates structures of sin.” See Sollicitudo rei socialis, no. 37 and Evangelium vitae, no. 23-4.
and “tend to create a culture of conformity and passivity.”30 Whereas the viability of institutional culpability, or vincible ignorance *per se,* perhaps remain open to debate, employing the category of social sin to connect the structural injustices John Paul identifies with more nonvoluntary influences that abet and result from communal actions would help the tradition better identify and redress threats to agency.31 The nonvoluntary dimension of social sin holds considerable potential for unmasking the ideological and subconscious dynamics at play that abet the deprivation and violence visited upon those in need encountered via the movements.

Concrete experiences from the “underside of history” have led some theologians and ethicists to propose alternative tools that enlarge operative presuppositions, opening new analytical spaces. Womanist theologian Katie Canon notes that prevailing ethical frameworks tend to equate responsible action with conceiving of and executing actions with clear and predictable results, reflecting free self-determination.32 The assumptions “predicated upon the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices prove null and void in situations of oppression,” she notes: “Racism, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation, as inherited, age-long complexes, require the [marginalized] community to create and cultivate values and virtues in their own terms so that they prevail against the odds with moral integrity.”33 Building upon Canon’s work on the impact of social power on moral agency, Sharon Welch distinguishes between an “ethic of control,” which equates responsible action with control on the assumption one is free to “guarantee the efficacy of one’s actions,”34 and an “ethic of risk,” which understands moral agency in terms of “responsible actions within the limits of bounded power,” entailing “persistent defiance and resistance in the face of repeated defeats.”35 Its attention to strategic risk-taking and rootedness in community illuminates the survival strategies struggling persons are compelled to adopt.

Considering the difference social and economic power make for the conception and execution of moral agency, an ethic of risk acknowledges that actions may only lead to partial results, but amid a long-term struggle with oppressive situations, the goal of moral action is “the creation of new conditions of possibility for the future.”36 An ethic of risk thus entails redefining responsible action, in terms of “the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes.”37 In the context of bioethics, Lisa Sowle Cahill characterizes analogous attempts to “act with integrity in...


31 Perhaps reflecting his history of engagement with liberation theology, Benedict XVI neglects to include in *Caritas in veritate* any references to social sin (or the option for the poor), even within discussions of distributive injustices or dangerous ideologies and sinful effects evident in the economy.

32 Crysdale, 40.

33 Katie Canon, Katie’s Canon: *Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 58-9. Canon’s work reflects on and refers to the African-American community, but her arguments relate to other marginalized communities including but not limited to those examined herein.


35 Ibid., 45.

36 Crysdale, 40-1.

37 Welch, 46.
the midst of unavoidable conflict and adversity” as exercises of “adverse virtue.” Experiences from the movements, including those of migrant women profiled here, indicate that, to the extent that women find themselves in social, economic and political roles that deny them moral agency, they are proportionately more cognizant of the ambiguity and risk entailed in moral choice. This is not to suggest that vulnerability is the goal or that women are essentially different moral reasoners; rather, those who suffer from social powerlessness “are able to be more honest about the risk inherent in all moral choice.” These insights may help enlarge narrow normative frameworks toward a more adequate understanding of marginalized persons’ agency and integrity.

Whereas an “ethic of control” reflects, but does not exhaust, the tendencies of Catholic social thought, these distinctions help highlight consequences of constrained agency that get diminished in frameworks that privilege autonomous control. Integrating a view of moral agency as entailing both control and risk seeks to engender contexts and conditions that empower agents, while attending to the responsibilities of the vulnerable and those whose choices impact them. Thus expanding dominant understandings of agency and social sin may help better value the courageous resilience of constrained agents without excusing practices or institutions that facilitate harm or suffering. The witness of the movements sensitizes the tradition to forces constraining access to basic goods and the exercise of human rights.

Conscientious Discernment and Prophetic Obedience: The Path to U.S. Health Care Reform

Enhancing the contextualization of moral actions introduces significant “contingency and complexity to moral decision making.” In my own context this process ensued under a national spotlight in the contentious health care reform debate. The significant role women religious from the Catholic Health Association (CHA), and NETWORK Catholic Social Justice Lobby played in passing the 2010 Affordable Care Act provides a fruitful example of how “movements” can open up social space for prudential applications of social principles, as well as a more capacious understanding of moral discernment more broadly considered. Their actions challenge increasingly circumscribed hierarchies of values and an elevation of perceived unity over prophetic defense of the vulnerable.

39 Crystdale, 54.
40 Crystdale’s own “hybrid” of risk and control forwards a worthwhile end for this purpose: “The goal of one’s actions may be to enhance control for those who lack it, but this goal will be undertaken in a stance of risk,” that is, a stance marked by “redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic resourcefulness over the long haul.” Crystdale goes on to propose a Lonerganian ethic of emergent probability to help us understand our position as human actors within both an ethic of risk and an ethic of control. Crystdale, 43-48, 57.
42 I develop an analysis of the “Affordable Care Act” case and its implications in “Reservoirs of Hope: Catholic Women’s Witness,” Rosemary P. Carbine and Kathleen J. Dolphin, eds., *Women, Wisdom, and Witness:*
As the debate over health care reform began, the U.S. Catholic community prioritized several objectives: universal access to affordable care, expanded access to health care for immigrants, and maintaining the Hyde Amendment’s prevention of federal funding for elective abortions. When the Senate version of the bill moved to the House for consideration, where pro-life critics charged it allowed for abortion funding, CHA President Carol Keehan broke with the U.S. bishops’ opposition and issued a statement adding CHA’s support to the bill. As the nation’s largest group of not-for-profit sponsors and systems, CHA is comprised of more than 1200 Catholic health care facilities and related services; it engages in advocacy from community to global health issues rooted in the Catholic social tradition. Keehan indicated that she had become convinced that abortion coverage language in the Senate version could be resolved, as mechanisms were in place to isolate coverage from government-regulated health care markets, and that the legislation presented an historic opportunity to extend the “human right” of universal and affordable health care to millions of Americans. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK Social Justice Lobby, issued a letter of support to members of Congress signed by the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and over 75 heads of orders of women religious. The letter urged members to “cast a life-affirming ‘yes’ vote” on the health care bill, acknowledging it was an “imperfect measure,” but a crucial next step in realizing universal coverage. The letter underscores the apostolic context for their advocacy:

As the heads of major Catholic women's religious order in the United States, we represent 59,000 Catholic Sisters in the United States who respond to needs of people in many ways. Among our other ministries we are responsible for running many of our nation's hospital systems as well as free clinics throughout the country. We have witnessed firsthand the impact of our national health care crisis, particularly its impact on women, children and people who are poor. We see the toll on families who have delayed seeking care due to a lack of health insurance coverage or lack of funds with which to pay high deductibles and co-pays. We have counseled and prayed with men, women and children who have been denied health care coverage by insurance companies. We have witnessed early and avoidable deaths because of delayed medical treatment.

On the basis of this tireless commitment and the bill’s potential to dramatically extend access to care while upholding conscience protections and investing significantly in pregnant women’s support, NETWORK cast its position as “the real pro-life stance.” As other pro-life Catholic organizations endorsed CHA’s position despite continued opposition from the bishops’ conference’s continued opposition, several pro-life members of Congress came to support the
bill; they were convinced that ambiguities in the proposed law concerning abortion would be resolved, given the March 24, 2010 presidential executive order promising to ensure no federal funds would be spent on abortion. During the signing ceremony for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama credited CHA and NETWORK’s allies with the bill’s passage.

As Campbell reflected on the Act’s $250 million Pregnancy Assistance Fund, in contrast to soaring public rhetoric about protecting family values, these funds for holistic support (from baby food to post-partum counseling to parenting classes) that target root causes to reduce abortion “extend a compassionate hand of support to women rather than a judgmental finger waved in condemnation.” Whereas internal Catholic disagreement persisted over the means of reducing abortion rather than the morality of abortion per se, many have noted that “industrialized countries that achieve universal or near-universal coverage have demonstrably lower abortion rates” than does the United States. Too often a Catholic political ethic isolates life and justice issues or elevates “non-negotiables,” whereas strategies in this legislation’s vein


47 Jerry Filteau, “NETWORK, and Other Catholic Groups Grow More Influential in Washington Pro-life, social-justice Catholics gain traction on Hill” National Catholic Reporter (April 16, 2010), available at http://ncronline.org/news/politics/pro-life-social-justice-catholics-gain-traction-hill (accessed April 30, 2010). Reflecting on the role of NETWORK and CHA Andrea Vicini noted in La Civilta Cattolica, "Beyond the novelty of a female ‘voice’ engaged in society and the church, the discussion that accompanied the path of the reform in the past months has shown how much it is possible to track, at various levels of today's ecclesial context, the common and shared determination that the social doctrine of the Catholic Church is at the vanguard in asking for a consistent and long-term commitment to justice and a clear preferential option for the poor." However, he notes, when such a strong commitment to Gospel-based values is translated into action, “differences concerning the modalities for acting on this commitment” ensue. “La riforma sanitaria negli Stati Uniti (Health Reform in the United States)” in La Civiltà Cattolica II/3839 (2010): 466-478 at 476.

48 The Affordable Care Act provides $25 million for each of fiscal years 2010 through 2019. It authorizes the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish and administer the fund in collaboration and coordination with the Secretary of Education. As its first disbursement, the Department of Health and Human Services awarded $27 million for the support of pregnant and parenting teens in states and tribes nationwide on September 28, 2010 (see HHS press release, available at http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/09/20100928d.html, [accessed April 14, 2011]).

49 Peg Chemberlin and Sister Simone Campbell, “Health reform will help reduce the number of abortions,” The Hill’s Congress Blog (July 14, 2010), available at http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/healthcare/108747-health-reform-will-help-reduce-the-number-of-abortions (accessed September 22, 2010). Cahill has argued that the universal church’s too frequent silence on women’s economic, marital and maternity rights poses the greatest obstacle to wider appreciation of its “pro-life” message on abortion. She points to the 2007 call by the Vatican for Catholics to cease support for Amnesty International in light of perceived policy changes as indicative of the church’s tendency to downplay its support the full equality of women, thereby undermining “its own message that the welfare of women and children is important.” She notes “realities such as gang-rape of women in war and frequent ostracization of women who have been sexually violated,” the Vatican’s response merely that abortion is murder, that it kills an innocent child and that it cannot be justified even in cases of rape is “hardly an effective way to communicate the fullness of the ‘gospel of life.’” Cahill, “Protection of Life: Priorities and Politics” in We Hold These Truths: Catholicism and American Political Life, Catholic Church in the 21st Century Series, ed. Richard Miller (Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2008): 75-89.

of pregnancy assistance toward abortion reduction interconnect life issues with just social contexts, enhancing integrity and credibility for Christians promoting the fullness of the gospel of life.

In the wake of their support of the health care reform bill, the motives and competencies of certain groups of women religious were impugned, with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issuing an official statement charging “those who differed from the bishops’ interpretation of the health care bill with causing ‘confusion and a wound to Catholic unity.”’51 The focus in this fallout centered around the nature and limits of the bishops’ authority on matters of faith, morals, law and policy.52 Important distinctions were revisited, such as the application of universal moral teachings and specific moral principles to concrete policies. In the case of the divergence of some women religious from the bishops on health care reform, the debate occurred nearly entirely at the level of prudential judgments about technical legislative language. The disagreements arose not over the morality or legality of abortion, but “whether specific legislative provisions in fact did what the drafters of the legislation insisted they did—namely, prohibit federal funding of abortions in accord with the principles of the Hyde Amendment.”53 By contrast, Cardinal Francis George, (then president of the USCCB), cast the matter less in terms of prudential judgment than ecclesiology, concerned with the nature of the church and its legitimate spokes(men).54

While concerns about lack of unity are understandable at the level of general principles, in their exercise of practical wisdom at this level of contingent applications, NETWORK and CHA claimed a legitimate space to witness to Catholic values in concrete circumstances. In so doing, they demonstrated an understanding of conscientious obedience that departs from one of blind acquiescence. In fact from one perspective, the prudential discernment that played out amid the health care reform debate could be interpreted as successful—whereas not every member of the Catholic community arrived at identical conclusions regarding how to best protect the same values, the public reasoning and communal conscience formation ultimately influenced pending policy to better reflect and protect such values, as indicated by the executive order on abortion


53 Gaillardetz, “The Limits of Authority: When bishops speak about health care policy, Catholics should listen, but don’t have to agree,” Commonweal (June 30, 2010).

54 Allen, “Health Care.”
funding. Catholic sociologist Gordon Zahn has argued that “free exchanges of openly contested statements of moral principles and proposals for their application will do a much better job of fulfilling the [church’s redemptive] mission” than when Catholic social thought remains centered in what he calls the “statements and actions of those in charge of ‘the home office.’”

The social witness of the movements cautions against overdetermining applications and shutting down dialogue in the name of perceived unity or certitude.

The Catholic tradition enjoys an ambiguous history regarding the relationship of individual conscience to official church teaching. Whereas an understanding of conscience as conformity to the teaching of the hierarchy remains in tension with the shift to a more personalist model at Vatican II, the discernment of U.S. Catholic groups at the health care reform moment demonstrates a response to the call to actively discern responsibility in light of the gift and challenge of God’s law of love. As Keehan put it, “This was a bill that, for the first time in the lives of 32 million Americans, gave them a chance to have decent health insurance…That was a heavy burden on my conscience, and on our organizational conscience…We did not differ on the moral question, or the teaching authority of the bishops.”

In the spirit of the council’s characterization of conscience as an encounter with the divine basis of moral obligation in Gaudium et spes, the women religious profiled here are witness to an understanding that entails the capacity and willingness to pursue the truth about doing the right thing in concrete, complicated circumstances, rather than having all the answers. Their efforts to seek the good, and thereby encounter God, witness to an inclusive understanding of church and the active agency Christian discipleship invites and demands. Understanding conscientious discernment as inclusive of multiple sources of moral wisdom—including the riches of scripture, the wisdom of the Catholic community over the centuries, natural law, insights of church officials and theologians, moral exemplars, as well as the reflective experiences of those immersed in health care ministries and the details of legislative analysis as in the case at hand—calls Catholics to a more complex and proactive endeavor than assumptions that restrict such sources to the teaching authority of the hierarchy alone.

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59 In Gaudium et spes the council characterizes conscience as that “secret core and sanctuary of a [person], where he [or she] is alone with God whose voice echoes in his [or her] depths.” (no. 16). This encounter is “mediated through [a person’s] agency, and hence through the spirit, reason, affections and relationships that constitute human agency.” David E. DeCosse, “Conscience issue separates Catholic moral camps” National Catholic Reporter (November 10, 2009).

60 DeCosse, “Conscience issue separates Catholic moral camps.”
Outside observers have long perceived the diverse manifestations of discipleship flowing from some of these underlying differences. In the aftermath of the health care act’s passage, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristoff detailed accounts of the “two Catholic churches” he encountered through his international travels that in some ways reflect the approaches examined in this seminar: one the rigid, all-male, Vatican hierarchy obsessed with dogma and rules (that he deems “out of touch”), and the other, that of movements which support life-saving aid organizations and operate “superb schools that provide needy children an escalator out of poverty.” He highlighted the Maryknolls’ work in Central America and that of the Cabrini Sisters in Africa. Kristoff’s bifurcated depiction may resonate with those who prefer to retreat to either the hierarchical or “grass-roots” versions. Yet ecclesiologist Richard Galliaretz fittingly lifts up the unity of the faith that Catholics profess, concluding that there must arise a place where “the doctrinal teaching of the bishops and the dirt-stained testimony of those who experience God’s grace on inner-city streets, in prisons, hospitals and immigration advocacy centers, can meet.” Discerning the promptings of the Spirit in the church and world demands these different routes not only encounter but mutually inform (and transform) one another.

Internecine Catholic divides may not be reduced to fault lines between bishops and nuns (or Catholic social thought and the movements), to be certain. Nor do the women religious ministering within the United States or elsewhere comprise a monolith—their diversity exceeds their different congregations’ charisms, ministries, theologies and members’ idiosyncrasies. Yet the prophetic obedience exhibited by women religious profiled here suggests an “inductive and communal mode of reasoned moral insight,” which, rather than posing a threat to Christian faith or pluralism, may help restore public discourse in the wake of postmodern critiques. The advocacy groups’ theopolitical imagination expanded notions of pro-life agendas and conscience for political and religious communities alike. Bringing the concrete suffering of those marginalized into moral discernment and policy formulation, they both staked a principled religious claim and invited collaboration. Even under the scrutiny of concurrent Vatican investigations, these women’s bold and humble compassion—rather than fearful legalism—

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63 As Julie Clague has posited, “If one examines the frequent appeals to the work of the Holy Spirit in Catholic Church teaching, one could be forgiven for concluding that the Spirit spends a rather disproportionate amount of time operating within the bounds of the doctrinal formulations and pronouncements of the Magisterium…the Spirit of Truth might be prompting a quite different response.” Clague, “Moral Theology and Doctrinal Change,” in Moral Theology for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Celebration of Kevin Kelly, eds., Julie Clague, Bernard Hoose, and Gerard Mannion (London: T&T Clark, 2008): 67-79 at 77.


65 In December of 2008 the Cardinal Franc Rodé, C.M., Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, announced a three-year Apostolic Visitatin investigating the lifestyles of women religious. In 2009 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith launched a doctrinal inquiry into the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, charging the conference had failed to sufficiently promote the
narrated the Christian story. Beyond healthcare, women religious faithfully minister with undocumented immigrants, with torture victims, the homeless, as lobbyists, and, in Sandra Schneiders’ words, “in myriad other situations in which there [are] no easy answers and the stakes for real people [are] as high as they were for the woman taken in adultery to whom Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God as compassion redefining justice.”

Methodological Insights from the Movements: Consultative, Conflictual and Converted

The social witness of the movements profiled here suggest several methodological challenges to Catholic social thought; their example bids the tradition to undertake approaches that are more consultative, “conflictual” and converted. With a few exceptions, widely consultative processes have not been the norm in the formulation of magisterial social doctrine. Reflective of particular models of authority women religious have adopted in response to Vatican II, NETWORK has embodied consultative processes since its founding in 1971. A self-described national movement of people challenged by the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching, NETWORK explicitly “invite[s] the participation of people from all sectors of our society and place[s] the needs and voices of people living in poverty at the center of [its] decision making.” NETWORK regularly presents priority issues and then polls its membership to determine on which issues they would like to see its energies focused. Its connection to service agencies operated by its membership helps to keep NETWORK in touch with those “on the receiving end” to facilitate their participation, as evidenced in their three-part TANF Watch Program over the past fifteen years, in which they interviewed thousands of patrons in various emergency facilities around the country to examine the short- and long-term effects of the 1996 Welfare Reform legislation. NETWORK’s participative decision making, collaborative management style and uniform staff salaries attempt to reflect the social commitments that guide its policy analysis. Its staff value coalition work theologically, not just strategically, perceiving God at work in other human rights movements. In this vein a more collegial consultation of a listening hierarchy would better exemplify traditional principles of human dignity and subsidiarity. As Cahill has

church’s teachings on the male-only priesthood, homosexuality and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church as the means to salvation as warned eight years prior.


67 At the 1986 NCCB meeting Bishop James Malone called the consultative critical process “a new and collegial method of teaching . . . For the first time the people of God have been involved in [the pastorals’] formation.” Bishop James Malone, “The Church: Its Strength and Its Questions,” Origins Vol. 16, No. 23 (20 November 1986): 393-98 at 395.


70 Veteran NETWORK lobbyist Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ notes NETWORK staff continually ask, “How do we find God at work and cooperate with that work of God dancing across the world?” Personal interview with Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ, Washington, DC, July 23, 2002.
put it, “[u]nless discourses about morality, society and politics are fully and freely participatory, then knowledge about these realities and the obligations they entail will be partial at best, a self-serving lie at worst.”

The U.S. bishops’ strong desire for assent and uniformity in “messaging” in the health care reform debate reflects the prevailing emphasis on a consensual and top-down model of social change. The social witness of the movements suggests that without engaging grassroots mobilization, confronting issues of economic and political power, and tolerating conflict, work toward and implementation of changes to the status quo will remain stunted. Some theologians and ethicists have characterized John Paul II’s development of solidarity as marked by caution at the service of safeguarding social peace. The pope softens even the option for the poor’s “conflictual implications by stressing solidarity as collaboration among rich and poor, and among the poor themselves.” This dominant approach presumes that, “imbued with the virtue of solidarity, social elites voluntarily will undertake practices of social dispossess and divestment of privilege.” This tactic overlooks the struggles and constraints an ethic of risk highlights. By contrast, Bryan Massingale terms “conflictual solidarity” an approach that takes seriously how the virtue is lived in the midst of reality marked by social conflict and attuned to exploited subjects who bear God’s image.

Whereas the documents of Catholic social thought reflect an awareness that concentrated economic power generally produces concentrated political power, the tradition appeals “primarily to existing economic and political leaders (beneficiaries of concentrated power) as the key agents of change.” The Australian bishops have promoted engagement of the poor and the oppressed as the engine of such change, given that “God has chosen the little and excluded ones

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71 Cahill, “Moral Theology: From Evolutionary to Revolutionary Change,” 224.
72 Liberation theologians and social ethicists have noted magisterial Catholicism’s tendency to prioritize harmony and synthesis in ways that circumvent necessary conflict. See e.g., John Sniegocki, Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Globalization: The Quest for Alternatives (Marquette University Press, 2009), 1-354 at 314 and Mary Hobgood, Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory: Paradigms in Conflict (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), chapter six.

74 Massingale, 81-2. Like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King was convinced that “privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” (April 16, 1963).
75 Massingale, 83-4. Sally Scholz similarly characterizes “political solidarity” as oppositional in nature and informed by the influence of strong moral obligations. Sally J. Scholz, Political Solidarity (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2008): 36.
76 Sniegocki, 295.
to play the key role in the drama of humanity and to act as the central agents of the Kingdom.” 77

As this statement and others by Asian, Latin American and Canadian bishops’ conferences illustrate, some regional episcopal conferences are more often attuned to grassroots experiences and insights, yet the bishops’ role has been reduced to that of “promoting the teaching and diffusion of the church’s social doctrine.” 78 An overly centralized and consensual social model often overlooks the role of local efforts essential to social change and mutes prophetic critique.

This disconnect between the recent resurgence of top-down, centralized ecclesiastical practices and the church’s public advocacy of dialogue, grassroots participation, and human rights, suggests the need for ongoing conversion. 79 The complex social realities and consultative give-and-take experienced in the movements open social spaces that may help to “convert” the tradition. 80 The collaborative efforts of NETWORK and KBI reflect a “two-way street” of social engagement, modeling partnership and reciprocal “evangelization.” 81 KBI understands itself as “a point of contact and mutual transformation not only for the migrants, staff, and community members who encounter one another in the context of [its] programs, but also for the Provinces of California and Mexico, the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, and Jesuit Refugee Services.” 82 As another example, it was through participation the USCCB’s campaign for a living wage that several U.S. dioceses identified unjust compensation practices within their own institutions. 83 Such opportunities can safeguard against isolating fundamentalisms. The


79 Sniegocki, 331.


81 In Dignitatis humanae the Council admits ways in which it has learned from the wider experience of human beings (no. 1), and a string of papal apologies indicate that the contemporary church is somewhat conscious of its pilgrim nature, although further steps are necessary. See Charles Curran, Catholic Social Teaching, 1891-present (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002): 104-5.

Reflecting on Pope John Paul II’s acknowledgement of Christian wrongs against non-Catholics throughout its history prayers for forgiveness in March of 2000 (Lent of the Jubilee year), Margaret Farley has written, “Embodying vulnerability in the expression of truth, never was the church more strong. Acknowledging not only mistakes but real evil, never was the church more prophetic in its commitment to justice. Respecting those who differ from the church—not only in belief but in policy—never were the church’s own hops for peace more clear.” See Farley, “The Church in the Public Forum: Scandal or Prophetic Witness?” in The Catholic Church, Morality and Politics, ed. Curran and Leslie Griffin (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 205-23 at 220. The piece originally appeared in the Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 55 (2000): 87-101.


83 Personal interview with Sharon Daly, (then)-Vice President for Social Policy, Catholic Charities USA (former Director, Domestic Social Development Office, United States Catholic Conference) 4/1/03. She added that, regrettably, diocesan Catholic school teachers’ wages are “abysmally low” compared to public school teachers’ wages.
movements are not themselves immune to such temptations, of course, but my focus herein has treated the correctives that certain practical approaches bring to social discernment. Methods that join “tradition-constituted,” particularist contributions with open, self-critical, “enrichable” engagement—whether from David Tracy, David Hollenbach, Johan Verstraeten or others—help shield social Catholicism (in theory or praxis) from ideological distortion from within. I have argued elsewhere that a commitment to strengthening the connection between the embodiment and engagement of Christian norms, principles, and practices enhances the integrity of public theology and political advocacy. The movements open up a space for precisely such encounters. In mutual dialogue with praxis, Catholic social thought can remain fully theological and fully public, open to ongoing conversion by the suffering and resilience of those in need, rather than triumphalistic in its possession of truth or static in its formulations.

Conclusions

The social witness of the movements profiled herein challenges reigning theoretical presuppositions and practical methodologies alike. The compromising realities facing reluctant migrants contest dominant assumptions about autonomy and the underdeveloped category of social sin. The theopolitical vision of NETWORK imagines a situation of equity and flourishing by modeling it “at home,” then lobbying to make it a reality; it at once embodies church as performance of counter-politics and church as public agent in civil society. The witness of CHA opens up a social space for engaged, conscientious discernment on the part of the laity.

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86 Tracy writes, “Each of us contributes more to the common good when we dare to undertake a journey into our own particularity…than when we attempt to homogenize all differences in favor of some lowest common denominator…[or] are tempted to root out all particularity and call it publicness.” See Tracy, “Defending the Public Character of Theology,” The Christian Century 98 (April 1981): 350-6 at 355.

87 Werner Jeanrond, “Theology in the Context of Pluralism and Postmodernity: David Tracy’s Theological Method,” in Postmodernism, Literature and Theology, ed. David Jasper (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 143-63 at 145. Tracy’s models of “classic” and “conversation” and Hollenbach’s “intellectual solidarity” help ensure that Catholic public engagement remains firmly grounded in Catholic identity and takes seriously the temporal on its own terms. Johan Verstraeten has similarly argued that Catholic social (thought?) “should preserve the tradition but remain open to new insights and new forms, some of which will come from other traditions and from secular thought, even if at first they seem incommensurable…CatST must be looked at as tradition-constituted but enrichable by narrative and praxis.” See Verstraeten, “Rethinking Catholic Social Thought as Tradition,” 69-70.


I analyze ways in which political advocacy groups’ activity and self-understanding challenge reigning theoretical typologies in Prophetic and Public chapters 3-5.
These ministries of women religious are rooted in a prophetic stream of the Catholic heritage. Prophets are not merely disruptive iconoclasts, they are attuned to the divine pathos and thereby seek to console and defend those who suffer. Prophetic ministries in any venue risk posing a threat to the political or religious status quo, as the aftermath the health care debate illustrates. Yet they also remind the tradition of its call to lament “... oppression as contrary to God’s will, and energiz[e] real people to imagine and begin to strive for an alternate future.” At the front lines, the movements can perhaps readily discern this charge as more urgent than the task of safeguarding perceived unity or circumscribing theological interpretation. Attentiveness to dire, three-dimensional narratives challenges a sanguine solidarity and primarily cautious political involvement; it imagines anew how a listening hierarchy, shaped by the tradition’s own commitments and open to its own ongoing conversion, can model integrity. Where they are witness to God’s reign amid life’s complex realities, the movements author the future of Catholic social thought in dynamic directions.

Profiles of prophetic courage that transcend narrow acquiescence and of collaborative leadership that counters hierarchical power dynamics also serve as sources of hope. Encounters by way of the movements seem more likely to interrupt complacency and injustice than abstract principles or their carefully crafted corollaries; this is certainly borne out in my own teaching experience. In anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17-25, Rev 21:1-4) and in cooperation with the abundance of life already inaugurated (Jn 10:10), the movements foster a Christian hope that “breaks into” our lived realities and takes root.


92 Schneiders, “Religious life as prophetic life form,” part one of a five-part essay, National Catholic Reporter (January 4, 2010), available at http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious-life-prophetic-life-form (accessed October 8, 2010). She notes later in the series, “Jesus’ prophetic ministry of word and work was not merely a threat to the particular domination systems of Rome and Jerusalem. ...It was this definitive subversion of the violent human way of running the world by God’s loving way of luring creation, including us, toward union with God self that was the ultimate threat Jesus represented.” Schneiders, “Tasks of those who choose the prophetic lifestyle.”

93 Cahill, “Moral Theology: From Evolutionary to Revolutionary Change,” 226.