Culture

In her new Netflix special "Prodigal Daughter," Taylor Tomlinson's explores the comedian's religious anxieties, queerness and roots in church comedy. (NCR screen grab/Netflix/YouTube)

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In her new Netflix special "Prodigal Daughter," comedian Taylor Tomlinson dives into religious anxieties, her coming out as bisexual at age 30 and her roots in church comedy.

The standup set is refreshing for queer people like me who were raised in conservative Catholic spaces — I chuckled in solidarity when she spoke of navigating "gay prude representation" — but the real takeaway was Tomlinson's evisceration of sexism in Christianity.

Recalling one pastor who delivered his Christmas sermon from Mary's point of view, Tomlinson describes the women in her congregation as deeply moved — and the men as deeply confused about why this mattered. Some didn't understand why the pastor would even think about Mary.

"Which one's Mary again?" she speaks in a deeper voice with a quizzical expression. "Are you talking about the vessel? You talking about the hole we put the Lord in? You talking about the Jesus jar? You talking about the Christ cubby? You talking about the savior sack? You talking about the prophet pocket?"

The live audience laughed along as Tomlinson's analogies got more and more outlandish, yet I was struck by the truth of the joke — and not just the Protestant downplaying of Mary's importance in the Nativity. It brought to mind the way that many Catholic women view themselves strictly as vessels of life.

I once conducted a large-scale study of Catholic American women who chose to wear chapel veils. Women were required to cover their heads at Mass prior to the Second Vatican Council; once the requirement was lifted, mantillas became nearly obsolete. But in the last 10-20 years, a subset of millennial and Gen Z women have been taking up the practice, and the language they use is strikingly relevant to Tomlinson's anecdote.

"I am a vessel," one woman told me. For her, veiling represents how "I have Christ's sign that I am a vessel, and it reminds me that you are veiling what can give life." Another woman similarly said "I wear a veil at Mass because all women's bodies are tabernacles."

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While Tomlinson's jokes ring with a Protestant perspective, she clocked the objectification that Catholic women face and internalize even in spaces that do elevate Mary — at least in word. This is not to say that veiling is not a form of exercising bodily autonomy; as Saba Mahmood argues in her book *Politics of Piety* , women can have agency but not be feminist. But where Mary's unwavering "yes" is idolized not as choice and consent but as feminine obedience and submission, girls and women don't always feel empowered.

"I'm very scared of childbirth, which makes sense, because I grew up in church, where not even abstinence could protect you fully, right?," Tomlinson joked. "They told you the story of Mary. They're like, 'yeah, keep your knees closed, hope God doesn't pick you.' It adds a whole other layer of fear to childbirth. What if it's breech? What if it's sick? What if it's God?"

Tomlinson hits the nail on the head on the lack of agency that many of us felt as female children, and the essentialization of our role as "vessels" whose personal experience was easily sidelined, just like Mary's. Raised from childhood with the pressure of purity culture and the idolization of motherhood, many of us didn't think that we could say no if God asked us to bear a divine child — or if we would be asked for our consent at all.