

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 4, 2012 at 5:00am

---

## Academics react to Vatican move against Farley book

*The following reactions by theologians and other academics to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's "Notification" regarding Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley's Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics were gathered by the Yale Divinity School for distribution to the media:*

### **Harold Attridge, Dean of Yale Divinity School**

Professor Emerita Margaret Farley has long been a revered figure at Yale Divinity School. She has inspired generations of students, both men and women, to take seriously the task of theological ethics, by examining the logic of our moral judgments in the light of scripture, tradition, and human experience.

Her work on sexual ethics, *Just Love*, is an award-winning example of that enterprise, recognized by Christians of many traditions as a thoughtful attempt to wrestle with some of the most divisive social issues of our time.

Honest and creative theologians have often met a critical response to serious theological reflection and it is not a surprise that Professor Farley's work has done so as well. In time, I suspect, those who react negatively to it now will come to appreciate the important contribution it makes to what must be our constant effort to examine the foundations of our moral life. The YDS community continues to appreciate the unique insights Professor Farley brings to the theological enterprise, and we look forward to her future contributions in the field.

### **Emilie Townes, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Yale Divinity School, past president of the American Academy of Religion**

To read Margaret Farley is to be in the company of a fine mind, a precise eye, an open heart, an inspiring teacher, and a woman of deep and abiding faith. Her work has influenced several generations of ethicists and people of faith who are Christians and other religious traditions (and those yet to come) to think a bit

more deeply and prayerfully about how we experience each other as thinking, feeling humans of mind and body.

The gift of her work is that it both sheer delight and awesome challenge as she works deeply within the tradition to speak outwardly to our broken world.

Farley knows what she thinks and communicates in a clear style?taking the reader on a journey that encourages us to think along with her such that a genuine conversation emerges and we and creation are all the better for it. She is a moral theologian par excellence.

**Angela Batie Carlin, Former Campus Minister at St. Louis University**

Margaret Farley?s construction of an approach to sexual ethics based on a framework of justice has been a critical pastoral tool in working with young Catholic adults who know Church teaching about sexual morality but seek to integrate it more fully in the greater values they espouse.

Inviting young adults to see sexual morality as a justice issue has prompted their sexual decision-making to have greater thoughtfulness and depth. Margaret Farley?s suggestion to employ justice as an essential criterion in discernment of sexual relationships has been an invaluable contribution to people of faith in this important and often misunderstood part of the human experience.

**Kristen J. Leslie, Ph.D., Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care, Eden Theological Seminary**

Sr. Margaret Farley, PhD. is a leading Roman Catholic scholar whose work in Christian Ethics dares to respond, in just and ethical ways, to the most difficult of relational questions.

Advertisement

Her book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Ethics*, offers a clear ethical framework for relational issues that too often become dangerously politicized by the Church and politicians who would use these issues as a way to serve their own individual agendas. Her work offers to Christians and non-Christians alike a wise, consistent and faithful response to the question about sexual ethics, upholding what is at the very heart of the best of Catholic teachings.

**Lisa Cahill, J. Donald Monan Professor, Department of Theology, Boston College**

1. It is important to understand the nature and role of academic theology or theological scholarship as "faith seeking understanding." Theology is rooted in faith and practical concerns. But the main purpose of theology--unlike pastoral teaching or guidance--is the understanding of God and of humans in relation to God. Understanding involves intellectual justification and cogency. Finally, theology is a process of seeking. Theology is a process of inquiry and exploration in a dynamic and critical relation to other theological positions.

Theologians do not see or present their work as "official church teaching" and few of the faithful are confused about this fact. Readers of *Just Love* hardly need to be warned that this is not official church teaching; they will feel free to question, disagree and improve the points of the author, as is no doubt her intention.

2. The method of critique adopted by the authors of the Notification does not effectively promote either the specific contents of Catholic sexual teaching or the basic idea of objective morality based on the natural law. The method consists in three basic strategies:
  1. to state that Sr. Margaret has not adequately clarified the arguments of the book
  2. to state that her views are not official Catholic teaching
  3. to reiterate official teaching without engaging any of the substantive arguments for or against it.

Together these strategies create the unfortunate impression that

1. engaging Sr. Margaret's arguments and replies to previous inquiries is superfluous and unnecessary because the condemnation of her book was predetermined and the investigation a mere formality
2. there are in fact no reasonable arguments to back the positions asserted by the Notification
3. the CDF itself has abandoned the grounding of moral theology in the "objective nature of the natural moral law" and is relying solely on the authority of past conclusions.
3. The selection of moral issues to criticize does not reflect the priorities of Just Love. A huge concern of the book is gender-based violence and sexual oppression of women worldwide. These issues have actually received significant attention in recent papal teaching. They receive nary a mention in the Notification, which seems to find masturbation more important. The "usual suspects" dealt with in the Notification--masturbation, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage--reflect nothing so much as the polarizing "culture wars" now consuming the internal politics of the U.S. Catholic Church.
4. The timing of this intervention is incredibly and ironically bad. The U.S. bishops, and at their instigation the Vatican, are already attracting an enormous amount of negative press over their prosecution of American nuns. They have just thrown another log on the fire.

**Christiana Z. Peppard, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Theology & Science, Department of Theology, Fordham University**

Margaret Farley brings the spirit of charity to vexed moral questions. This is evident in her book *Just Love*, where—as in her teaching—Professor Farley embodies a fundamentally Catholic approach. That approach holds that all of reality—from the frontiers of scientific discovery, to scriptural interpretation, to “signs of the times”—is fodder for ongoing theological and moral discernment. Clearly, Farley recognizes that specific, personal conclusions in *Just Love* do not align with the pronouncements of the Catechism.

Yet it is nonetheless true that her rich scientific, philosophical, and theological reflections both stretch and embolden moral reflection regarding intimate relationships. It is precisely this approach—conducted always in the spirit of critical and faithful humility—that is a source of hope and a beacon of Christian witness to generations of students, scholars, religious and laity.

**Kate Ott, Assistant Professor of Christian Social Ethics, Drew University Theological School**

Farley’s contributions to Christian ethics generally and moral theology specifically offer a model of and invaluable resource for Christians, including Roman Catholics, who take seriously the obligation of moral discernment for the development of an informed conscience. Her scholarship and teaching are marked by precision, thoroughness, and a deep concern for the future of Christian ethics as well as faithfulness to its historical roots.

As a seminary professor and author of sexuality resources for families and congregations, I know future religious leaders, families, youth, and couples in Christian churches suffer from a lack of thoughtful, well-informed resources on issues of sexuality and sexual ethics leaving them with little guidance on how to understand and navigate the most important relationships in their lives. Just Love is an invaluable contribution to remedying this pressing problem.

Our churches and seminaries desperately need examples of insightful, balanced, and grounded writings on sexuality and sexual ethics that do not dismiss, but take seriously current developments in the sciences, theology, and philosophy. Just Love offers us that! *Just Love* is a once in a generation contribution that has the potential to change a stagnant dialogue and move people to new insights related to sexuality and sexual ethics.?

**Maura A. Ryan, John Cardinal O'Hara Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Associate Dean for the Humanities and Faculty Affairs, University of Notre Dame**

Anyone who has encountered Margaret Farley knows how seriously she takes her Catholic faith ? as a woman religious, as a theologian, and as a mentor to generations of students trying to understand their own faith more deeply. But she has always insisted that to take one?s Catholic faith seriously means to be willing to question traditional positions in light of new understandings of the human and of human relations and better insights into the conditions for human flourishing. This demand is all the more important where interpretations of the Christian tradition have had destructive consequences for individuals or communities.

**M. Shawn Copeland, Associate Professor, Systematic Theology, Theology Department, Boston College**

News of the Vatican's Notification against Margaret Farley?s *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006) is deeply disappointing and most disturbing. For decades, Margaret Farley has been a reasoned, responsible, and deeply compassionate voice urging ethical, indeed, moral behavior in human relationships. Professor Farley?s research and publications, teaching and lecturing are notable for rigor, clarity, nuance, depth, and meticulous distinguishing of practical and speculative questions from magisterial or official teaching.

**Martha Serpas, Martha Serpas, Professor of English, Creative Writing Program, University of Houston**

*Just Love* does not negate the codes of who only and when only that most Christians have been schooled in, but asks how we should love?a more serious and demanding question. Margaret Farley's scholarship is faithful to Catholic intellectual life?a prayerful examination of tradition, reason, and conscience?and brings early Church teaching to bear on contemporary issues. By her example we are encouraged to search out and revere Truth, which welcomes rigorous challenge and examination.

**William O'Neill, Associate Professor of Social Ethics, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley**

Margaret Farley, RSM is one of the most distinguished Roman Catholic moral theologians writing today, a friend and mentor to many in the field. Written for a religiously pluralist public, *Just Love* is widely acclaimed for its wisdom and compassion. In her life, as in her work, Margaret Farley is deeply faithful to the Church?a Church which affirms, ?investigation and questioning is justified and even necessary if theology is to fulfill its task.?[1] Already disturbed by the CDF?s treatment of religious women, many

faithful Catholics will find the Notification to be neither just nor loving.?

[1] *International Theological Commission, "Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria" in Origins (March 15, 2012), par. 41.*

**Paul Lakeland, Aloysius P. Kelley Professor of Catholic Studies, Director, Center for Catholic Studies, Fairfield University**

Margaret Farley is a careful and caring Catholic social ethicist, a woman of great integrity and a living legend among those she has taught and within the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society of America, of both of which organizations she has been President. It is the vocation of Catholic theologians and ethicists to work on the boundaries of what is known and to explore the relationship between Gospel values and the challenges of different times and different cultures. Margaret has done this with grace and wisdom throughout her life. The Vatican notification is a dark day for Margaret, but a black day in the history of the Church.

**David Hollenbach, S.J., University Chair in Human Rights and International Justice, Department of Theology, Boston College**

At a time when many elements of the Catholic approach to sexual ethics are being questioned in both the church and the larger society, Margaret Farley's book *Just Love* provides urgently needed reflection. It shows that key elements of the Christian tradition can help us think about the ethics of sexual behavior in ways that will help many live more human and more Christian lives. I deeply regret that church officials have failed to appreciate the important contribution Farley has made.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 03/23/2018 - 6:16am):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/academics-react-vatican-move-against-farley-book>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/forward/join?clickSource=end-article>

[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>