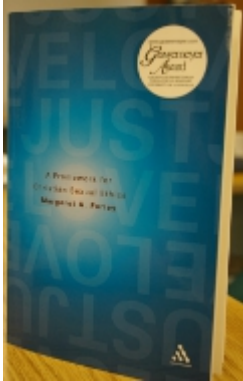


Theologian's book a wide-ranging study

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Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley's 2006 book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, whose book *Just Love* was sharply criticized by the Vatican on Monday, says in the work she believes our understanding of Christian sexual ethics must be reconsidered because of the vast changes occurring today in society's notions of sexuality.

"There may be nothing new about questioning human sexuality, assessing its psychological and social significance, defending or defying judgments of its moral possibilities," writes Farley in the first chapter of the 2006 book. "Yet the questioning that goes on today is decidedly different from most of what has preceded it in the latter history of Western culture."

In the face of such changes, writes Farley, she wants to "open new possibilities" in the "search for wisdom about sex and sexuality."

In its statement regarding the book, whose full title is *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith pointed to five specific areas of sexual ethics Farley addresses and says she "contradicts" or "is opposed to" or "does not conform" to church teachings.

Among the areas criticized by the Vatican are Farley's treatment in the book of the morality of masturbation, homosexual relationships and unions, and divorce and remarriage.

In a reading of the book, however, one finds that Farley does much more than simply address how Christians might respond to questions regarding the morality of each of those issues.

While Farley does address those issues, she does so only after first undertaking a wide-ranging study of how sexuality has been treated in cultures across the globe throughout history, of how the soul and the body should be considered separately and together in these questions, and how theories of justice might be applied to help create "norms" to guide our sexual actions.

At the time of its release, it was that scope of Farley's study, which garnered praise from a number of respected sources, including *America* magazine (which said the book was a "product of years of experience, reflection, scholarship, and wisdom") and *Catholic Books Review* (which said it "covered the topic with impeccable scholarship").

It also led to the book's awarding of the prestigious Grawemeyer award in 2008, with Susan Garrett, a professor at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary who directs the award program, calling it "an important message in light of all the confusion surrounding sexuality today."

In the book, Farley turns first to a survey of the questions at hand regarding human sexuality and the historical understandings of those questions, in broad chapters outlining the arguments of some of the most cited philosophers of our time -- paying particular attention to Western attitudes throughout history, separating them into the categories of Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian notions.

Among those three traditions, Farley finds strains connecting sexual understandings in each, paying particular attention to the influence of Stoicism on the development of Christian ethics of sexuality.

Detailing the Stoics' position that "sexual intercourse can be brought back under the rule of reason," Farley writes: "With the adoption of the Stoic norm for sexual intercourse, the direction of Christian sexual ethics was set for centuries."

After considering other cultures' ethical treatment of sexuality -- examining everything from the pre-modern islands of the South Seas to the Hindu *Kama Sutra* -- Farley proceeds to lay out her own proposal: the tying of philosophies of justice to sexual ethics.

In that way, she writes, she wishes to "move sexuality more completely from the realm of the pre-ethical (the realm of taboos) to the ethical."

"The blind sense of defilement that still haunts sex and sexuality must be subjected to relentless criticism and responsible repudiation," she writes. "One of the ways in which this can be done is to refine a justice ethic for sexuality."

Before proposing that ethic, however, Farley explores the diverse sources of Christian sexual ethics, including scripture, tradition, secular disciplines, and our own contemporary experience.

Here she also examines other proposed Christian frameworks for sexual ethics, mentioning in particular Lisa Sowle Cahill, a moral theologian at Boston College; Fr. Charles Curran, a moral theologian who now teaches at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas; and Jesuit Fr. James Keenan, a moral theologian who also teaches at Boston College.

While discussing how to consider church tradition when evaluating changes in modern society, Farley at one point cites Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. Farley quotes a commentary on the Second Vatican Council written by Ratzinger in 1969, which stated "not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition."

Referencing Ratzinger, Farley writes: "If the *rationales* behind longstanding beliefs and practices are no longer persuasive in the context of the tradition as a whole, then the practices and beliefs will be challenged, and they may need to change."

Farley also states that moral systems must take into account the experience of contemporary people, writing "moral truth must 'make sense.'"

For more on the Vatican's criticisms of Farley's 2006 book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, see [Vatican criticizes US theologian's book on sexual ethics](#) [1]

"When a deeply held conviction such as the equality of women and men, grounded in our experience appears to be contradicted by information from other sources, it must be tested against them," she continues. "If it continues to persuade us?then it must function also as a measure against which the other sources are tested."

Following an exploration of Christian notions of sexual ethics, Farley continues to a development of a notion of "just love" -- or a love which she says can be considered "true and just, right and good."

In Farley's analysis, the notion of "just love" has three criteria: It cannot falsify the "reality of the person loved," cannot falsify the "reality of the person loving," and cannot "violate, distort, or ignore the relationship between them."

Love, writes Farley, also has to be free and subject to choice. While accepting that we may initially fall in love unwillingly -- for example, be so shocked at someone's beauty that we immediately fall in love with them -- Farley asserts "we can choose to believe in, pay attention to, what we love."

It's from this notion of "just love" that Farley comes to the crux of her book: The development of a set of "norms" to guide sexual activities. Here she relies upon the traditional notion of justice as "to render to each his or her due," taking that to mean "persons and groups of persons ought to be affirmed according to their concrete reality, actual and potential."

The seven norms Farley gives for a framework of Christian sexual action:

- *Do no unjust harm*

Farley says the maxim to "do no unjust harm" takes on "particular significance" in sexual ethics as "each person is vulnerable in ways that go deep within."

"Precisely because sexuality is so intimate to persons, vulnerability exists in our embodiment and in the depths of our spirits," she writes.

- *Free consent*

Farley writes that sexual activities should be "relational" -- respecting each person's "capacities and needs for relationship."

"Sex must not violate relationality, but serve it," she writes.

- *Mutuality*

Out of that notion of "relationality," Farley writes that there must come a respect for the mutual ability of both sexual partners to both receive and give sexual action.

"The key for us has become not activity/passivity but active receptivity and receptive activity -- each partner active, each one receptive," she writes.

- *Equality*

Farley writes that sexual partners should not be too separated by class, age, or power. "The equality that is at stake here is equality of power," she writes. "If the power differential is too great, dependency will limit freedom, and mutuality will go awry."

- *Commitment*

Sexual desire without commitment, writes Farley, "leads to disappointment and a growing disillusionment."

Regarding whether brief sexual encounters such as "one night stands" could be considered moral, she writes: "Although brief encounters open a lover to relation, they cannot mediate the kind of union -- of knowing and being known, loving and being loved -- for which human relationality offers the potential."

- *Fruitfulness*

Here, Farley tackles the question of procreation as the center of the sexual act, saying the "fruitfulness" of "just love" would include procreation, but not be limited to it.

"Love brings new life to those who love," she writes. "The new life within the relationship of those who share it may move beyond itself in countless ways?. All of these ways and more may constitute the fruit of a love for which persons in relation are responsible. A just love requires the recognition of this as the potentiality of lovers; and it affirms it, each for the other, both together in the fecundity of their love."

- *Social justice*

From that question of fruitfulness, writes Farley, come other questions of how the loving pair interact with society in a "socially just" way.

"At the very least, a form of 'social justice' requires of sexual partners that they take responsibility for the consequences of their love and their sexual activity" in terms of pregnancy, childbirth, or public health concerns, she writes.

Once Farley develops these seven "norms," she continues to explore their application to the contemporary questions of sexuality highlighted by Monday's statement from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Ending the book with a defense of sort of her conclusions on those matters (detailed in Jerry Filteau's report: [Vatican criticizes book on sexual ethics \[1\]](#)), Farley writes "it is not an easy task to introduce considerations of justice into every sexual relation and the evaluation of every sexual activity.

"But if sexuality is to be creative and not destructive, then there is no substitute for discerning ever more carefully whether our expressions of it are just."

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