

EKATERINA KHONINEVA

“Vocation in the Flesh”: Gender and Embodiment in the Religious Anthropology of Modern Catholicism

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22394/2311-3448-2019-6-2-28-47>

Ekaterina Khonineva — European University at St. Petersburg; Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Kunstkamera) (St. Petersburg, Russia). ekhonineva@eu.spb.ru

In the early and medieval Christian tradition, the gendered body was understood as an obstacle to the cultivation of virtues on the one hand, and as a potential medium for transgressions on the other. Contemporary Catholic anthropology has another view of the subject's body and its senses and desires. This article is concerned with the pastoral project of increasing vocations and the way it is realized within Russian Catholic parishes. It also focuses on its rhetoric, placing significant emphasis on gendered embodiment. Based on participant observation materials and interviews with Catholics who have been “called,” the author analyzes the strategies for making a calling to celibacy genuine and persuasive. By including gender and sexuality within the concept of vocation, such rhetoric not only makes it possible to show consecrated life as something attractive, intelligible, and real, but also to raise awareness of true masculinity and femininity. Even though church discipline prescribes solitude, in this rhetoric, celibacy does not require one to become a disembodied and asexual angel. Conversely, by applying gendered embodiment, religious specialists aim to emphasize its utmost importance for vocation, which presupposes celibacy, thereby confronting both the early Christian perspective on the sinful body and secular views on constructed gender.

Keywords: anthropology of religion, Catholicism, monasticism, gender, embodiment.

THIS article focuses on a single pastoral program of the Catholic Church that constructs and broadcasts two legitimate ways of living a gendered body and sexuality — marriage and lifelong chastity in the priesthood and monasticism — united by a common model of

the religious vocation. For people who have been socialized in a secular culture, this statement may seem incorrect or even absurd, because in their social imagination these two images are likely to be placed on opposite poles. This bewilderment may also be supported by well-known examples of asceticism in the early and medieval Christian tradition, which implied a consistent denial of the bodily dimension of existence and reached its climax in the state of angelic disembodiment of monks and priests. Indeed, according to Talal Asad, the basis of early Christian asceticism was the constant struggle against sin and the potential conditions for it, supposedly rooted in the body of the subject, which required relentless control. However, despite the rhetoric of self-denial, even in medieval monasteries the work of transforming oneself was not always reduced to a mechanical procedure of leveling the desires leading to sin. Analyzing the pedagogical program of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Asad demonstrates how the desires commonly associated with sin could be converted into a resource for the cultivation of virtues. It was mainly due to the fact that in the 12th century, the monasteries' admission rate changed significantly: while in early Benedictine monasteries the monk's life began in childhood, mainly adult men were entering the newly formed monastic orders, and they likely had some sexual experience. In this context, St. Bernard's disciplinary project did not require the repression of the body's desires through mortification techniques but rather implemented a new discursive practice of ritual dialogue, in which monks could reformulate their memories of past experiences based on the moral obligations dictated by their new life (Asad 1993).

In the modern Catholic Church, as noted by researchers of European monastic culture Isabelle Jonveaux and Stefania Palmisano, the understanding of asceticism has undergone specific changes in comparison with the medieval Catholic tradition. The rhetoric of acceptance has replaced the rhetoric of self-denial. For example, the representatives of the new monasticism of Piedmont, whom Palmisano is studying, abandon the idea of angelic likeness, and recognize the possibility or even the right to be the same as those people who have not been called to consecrated life (Palmisano 2016). The monks from the Austrian and French congregations, whom Jonveaux worked with, avoided using the word "ascetic" to describe their daily lives (Jonveaux 2011). Concerning celibacy in particular, Jonveaux also shows changes in the values attributed to it. Modern monks are integrating sexuality into the concept of chastity, positioning it as an alternative form of sexuality. For them, refusing marriage and related sexual relationships does not mean rejecting their experience of masculinity. Therefore, the emergence of desires

of the body and flesh is not the fault of the monks: the question is how they will continue to work with these desires (Jonveaux 2018, 197–98).

Today, studies of the perception of the body and celibacy in the Catholic Church, mainly represented by the works of European sociologists,¹ testify to the discursive “turn toward the body,” which naturally intrigues the imagination of researchers. However, since this evidence is based not on long-term observation among religious specialists living in celibacy but on a series of conversations, many questions can and should be asked in this regard. I focus on one of them. I am interested in the discursive potential, pragmatic functions, and social consequences of this representation policy, which appeals to the categories of gender and sexuality and is implemented by the church elite for the lay audience. This issue will be considered on the basis of materials collected during observation in 2016–2018 in one Catholic parish located in the center of St. Petersburg, Russia.

“The harvest is plentiful, but laborers are few”²: Pastoral Support for Vocations

Like many other Russian Catholic churches, the parish of the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was revived in the early 1990s after a period of Soviet oblivion. After a long renovation in early 1997, regular worship services were resumed in the church. At the same time as the restoration of church structures, the first conversions to Catholicism and receptions occurred, as well as the active missionary labors of various monastic orders’ representatives and priests — “ethnic Catholics,” mainly from Poland and Belarus, and less often from other areas traditionally associated with Catholicism. A significant number of Russian Catholic laypeople have no relevant ethnic roots, and ethnoreligious sentiments have not dictated their coming to the faith. Although Catholic parishes in modern Russia have been and continue to be a center of attraction for ethnic minorities and those with relevant “Catholic roots,” they do not constitute a majority in the main metropolitan parishes, such as the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. My informants were mostly brought up in a secular culture, and for them Catholic socialization was the first ex-

1. Jonveaux et al. 2014; Jonveaux and Palmisano 2016; see also the article by Esther Peperkamp on one of the consequences of “bodily turn” for laypeople — the spread of natural planning technology, i.e., the practice of non-abortive contraception, which involves self-monitoring of (female) fertility: Peperkamp 2008.
2. Matthew 9:37.

perience of churching — an experience they wanted to live as fully as possible, following what God had determined for them.

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, every Christian is called to holiness (*Dokumenty* 2004, 86). The achievement of this state of holiness is directly possible in the unique type of life that God intended for each person. However, the knowledge of the destined path is not available to the Christian a priori: the calling must be revealed or otherwise discerned by the faithful himself or herself. The topic of vocations has been widely discussed in the Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which established the principle of the universal call to holiness and the apostolate. It would not be an exaggeration to say that today the problem of vocational discernment is one of the most prevalent in Catholic parishes, which is not so surprising, because it is directly related to the main subject of a pious Christian’s concern — the salvation of the soul. In the Russian context, it is not the scale of this concern that surprises, but the form it takes. For a better understanding of this context, it is worth mentioning several ethnographic details that distinguish the social space of the parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary from other Russian Catholic parishes, as well as Russian parishes from the rest of the Catholic world. The first is the fact the Catholic Church exists in Russia as a religion of the minority. At the very beginning of my fieldwork, I met a young ministrant, Ilya,³ who invited me to a mass in his parish. After the mass, we went to the nearest cafe to drink a cup of tea and to chat. The subject of our discussion was the story of one of Ilya’s friends, who lived in celibacy until he fell in love with a woman and “returned to the world.” According to Ilya, in their surroundings, this story caused unanimous condemnation of the hero, who for some people had been an example of “true vocation.” However, Ilya’s view of the situation was not condemnatory:

— Of course, this is a problem for all Catholics, especially men, especially in Russia, this [idea]: “Maybe I should be a priest?”

But Ilya found it difficult to answer my request to explain the basis of this categorical judgment:

— Well, because ... I don’t know why. That’s the problem for so many guys. Well, that only happens in our country. Like, bam! ... I had them [thoughts about vocation] too, but I realized it wasn’t for me.

3. The names of the informants have been changed.

By the time I spoke to Ilya, I had already met a few people who were thinking about a calling to the priesthood or monastic life. While writing this article I concluded that among my informants a person who has never considered a consecrated life as their main life project is the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, this is true both for men and women, contrary to Ilya's opinion — he only paid attention to the gender specifics of this phenomenon.⁴ What Ilya managed to notice subtly, though, was its local specifics. While support for priestly/monastic vocations is typical for the Catholic Church in general, in Russian Catholic structures this program has particular goals, conditioned by the idea of the necessity of developing the young Russian Catholic tradition fully, and avoiding exclusive association with their Eastern European neighbors. However, for the tradition to thrive, it needs religious specialists. Therefore, since the Catholic parishes have begun to be restored, care for new vocations has become one of the main issues on the Catholic ministry's agenda in Russia.

Pastoral support for callings aims to help every Christian to discover the "true self" and the path to holiness that God has defined for them. But this program can sometimes be seen as unevenly distributing its efforts. It is the calling to the priesthood and consecrated life that is regularly reflected in sermons, conferences, youth meetings, and informal conversations. This emphasis on the celibate vocations is particularly noticeable in the Cathedral of the Assumption. This parish is distinguished by being the part of the information space formed by three institutions: the parish itself, the only Russian Catholic major seminary, Mary the Queen of the Apostles, and the monastery of St. Anthony the Miracle Worker, which are united by formal and informal ties.⁵ The parish hosts the main events of the liturgical year, in which both Franciscan friars and seminarians participate. Many seminarians are ordained deacons and priests in the same parish. Deacons, in turn, host a variety of activities in the parish, including regular meetings with young people, and Franciscan monks invite parishioners for informal conversation. Such conversations often revolve around vocations: priests, deacons, and monks talk over a cup of tea about how they were called by God.

The territorial and social proximity of the seminary and the monastery makes the so-called vocational crisis clear to a broad parish au-

4. While men have many options for self-fulfillment in Catholic ministry (priesthood and/or monasticism; a variety of liturgical ministries), there is little choice for women. Basically the foremost opportunity for them to be "not just a layman" is to attach themselves to a monastic order.
5. The Franciscan order has an apostolic character. Unlike the representatives of the contemplative orders, Franciscan monks can be actively involved in everyday parish life.

dience. In a wave of anxiety about this crisis in the late 2000s, laypeople formed a group to pray for new priestly vocations in Russia. In the same vein, both the seminary and the monastery are working to overcome the crisis, organizing regular opportunities for young unmarried people to reflect on their vocation. Even though this discursive field is a bit less about the vocation of marriage, there are events for engaged and married couples to reflect on matrimony. These initiatives are linked to the current course of pastoral policy, which affirms marriage and consecrated life as equally worthy paths to holiness. Despite the words of Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians that it is better for a man not to touch a woman, and that only if it is impossible to resist temptation should a man get married,⁶ nowadays the emphasis has shifted toward the absolute equality of the call to marriage and the call to celibacy. Living in chastity is no longer seen as a sign of a higher spiritual state than living in matrimony.

These two images of self offered by the church (*a married person* and *a celibate person who have entirely devoted themselves to God*) may seem antagonistic to an outside observer due to institutional disciplining of embodied sociality and living gender identity. But both religious specialists living in celibacy and laypeople insistently reject this opposition. The evidence that Catholics may not be as sensitive to the difference between a lifetime of solitude and a lifetime of marriage as secular people are can be found in some vocational discernment trajectories. Laypeople may seek their calling for years — they may attempt to live in a monastery, then return to the world and enter into a romantic relationship, and then go back to the monastery; or go to the seminary, leave it assuming a vocation to marriage, but then try again to become a priest. To a large extent, this instability is determined by the method of recognizing one's vocation, which combines the autonomous interpretation of the signs of God's will and church control over this process. However, in this story I am more interested in how and why the call to celibacy, which in the early Christian tradition required the leveling of the gendered body, is presented in the modern Church not as the opposite, but as adjacent or equal to the call to marriage. In order to investigate this question, I propose to consider pastoral support for vocations as an inclusive project for all members of the church, which aims to disseminate knowledge about fundamental patterns of social behavior, linked by a common understanding of the gendered body. The goal of this project is not only catechetical (i.e., improving religious literacy)

6. 1 Corinthians 7: 8–9.

and pastoral (i.e., helping to recognize the calling), but also missionary (i.e., making someone consider the calling to a religious life). It should be noted that this project can be recognized as at least partly successful: although only a few people have reached ordination or have taken eternal vows, many consider the hypothesis “maybe I am not a husband or a wife” in their search for a calling. This undeclared missionary dimension of the pastoral program is conditioned by the particular rhetoric of persuasion that religious specialists use in order to masterfully appeal to images of the embodied interiorization of vocation.

“Here you are watching, and just falling in love with monasticism”: The Aesthetics of Persuasion

In Christian cultures, one of the crucial instruments of missionary activity is the speech genre of testimony. In the Catholic milieu, however, a testimony is often considered not as a narrative but as a completion of actions (sometimes systematic), through which a Christian realizes their apostolic function. Various ministries can be considered such testimonies, as well as charitable activities and ordinances; even funerals can be a *beautiful* testimony. This epithet, as it seemed to me initially, is not so much a characteristic of the idiolect of the specific representatives of the community, but rather an essential and stable element of the sociolect of Russian Catholics, acquired in the process of socialization in the church.

The discursive emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of the vocation testimony is a vivid strategy of persuasion. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer proposes the consideration of aesthetics as a component of religion experienced through *sensational forms* of access to the transcendent or, more precisely, the forms of persuasion in the reality of this access and the authenticity of interaction with the transcendent. Despite the appeal to individual sensual experience, these forms of persuasion are tools for the realization of institutional power, which controls the stimulation of the correct feelings and emotions in the subjects (Meyer 2010). Hereby, aesthetics can be understood both in a broad sense — as a set of sensual modes of knowledge — and in a more familiar, narrower apprehension, limiting the aesthetics to the sphere of culturally specific beauty.

In the Catholic environment, observing God’s vocation embodied in the human body often elicits an emotional response and becomes the starting point for the observer’s reflection on their own vocation, which, in essence, characterizes a successful testimony. Even though the focus may be on the sisters of the congregation working with the

seriously ill or homeless, the bleeding ulcers on their bodies cannot spoil the image of the sisterhood's beauty. Here is an excerpt from my conversation with Svetlana. She and her mother both joined the Catholic Church in the 1990s, when Svetlana was still a teenager. According to her, in the past, when she attended the parish youth meetings, the topic of callings was one of the most discussed. Seminarians, monks, and nuns were invited to the meetings to talk about their journey to the priesthood and consecrated life to help guide young people in their choices. Marriage as a vocation was less discussed at that time, and, as Svetlana recollects, young people had difficulty choosing between vocations for the priesthood or monasticism and marriage. A significant milestone in her thinking was the moment of realization that these vocations are equal, and that marriage is a life as holy as it is *beautiful*:

- No, they all seem to be the same, equally *beautiful* [vocations], because I've seen ... Well, I've been in touch with a lot of nuns and women, and I've seen ... from different orders, and I've seen that it was *beautiful*.
- What do you mean, beautiful?
- Beautiful [...] Well, you can see a person is happy, you can see that it is a vocation ... I don't know, I can't right now... that this is, like, some kind of dream come true. Well, beautiful; such beauty, I don't know, well, when you see a very beautiful family with many children [...] well, it is clear at once [...] that ... as if ... attractiveness ... here's a beautiful family — a very beautiful calling! [...] And so I could admire one calling and another at the same time. And here I should have chosen [Svetlana, catechist, thirty-two years old].

From this fragment, we can see that for a *beautiful* testimony it is not necessary to say or even do anything. The sight of a nun leaning against the wall during the mass may be as forcefully persuasive as the colorful stories of finding a vocation or spiritual singing in the monastery chapel. However, to claim nothing was happening to the faithful Catholic in the observed scene would be simplification. The material tangibility of the vocation also becomes real for the observer through olfactory and visual experiences. Distinctive description of such encounters with the mystery of God's call embodied in a person refers to a special glow coming from the body of the one called. For example, after deacon Ivan was ordained as a priest, many people noticed that he had changed instantly. "But he's a completely different man. He's shining! That is, he talks differently, looks differently, the photos show that he is different. It's happiness," one of the parishioners said in a conversation with me right after

the event. Based on the materials collected in a Mexican convent, anthropologist Rebecca Lester argues that strict monastic discipline has been replaced by a more subtle and almost imperceptible program of bodily self-discipline, which Lester defines as the *aesthetics of embodiment*. In the context of recognizing one's vocation, this implies the cultivation of new ways of experiencing one's own body and narrating this experience (Lester 2005, 36). I suppose that in deacon Ivan's case, the concept of aesthetics can be also used in a narrow sense and thus be expanded to include the mastering of techniques and body states that unequivocally refer to the experience of being called and causing bystanders to feel a direct encounter with divine beauty.

The body of the called person can also be metaphorically endowed with a pleasant fragrance:

For example, you're looking at nuns. There are a lot of them, you know them, and one of them, you see, smells something very beautiful, in her faith. You see, she's really happy. And she knows how to spread that joy around her, that's sisterhood for her ... Here you are watching, and just falling in love with monasticism ... and it always, always goes along with femininity. [Father Anton, priest, thirty-seven years old].

Descriptions of a distinctive "odour of sanctity" are characteristic of the Christian hagiographic tradition (Albert 1990; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2017). Thus, the breath of the Blessed Herman of Steinfeld, who lived in the 13th century, was described as so fragrant that one might think he was in a garden of beautiful flowers. The 17th-century Venerable Benedicta of Notre-Dame-du-Laus was said to have exuded a divine scent that remained on everything she touched (Classen et al. 1994, 53). An aesthetic experience of closeness to the holiness of vocation, to the beauty of the body of a called Christian, which seems to shine and appears fragrant, supports the idea that God acts in the life of a Christian better than any narrative about the same thing.⁷

This beauty, which is attributed to the embodied call of God, is not gender neutral at all. Conviction in the authenticity of God's call will only grow if the called also has a natural attractiveness for the opposite gender. Ilya, whom I mentioned earlier, once showed me a picture of a young man on his smartphone and called me for confirmation that he had an unbelievable beauty. After I agreed with this statement, my interlocutor told me that this young man is a seminarian and will soon be or-

7. Robert Orsi calls this *experience of presence*, see Orsi 2008.

dained. Ilya confessed that he often shows the photo of this seminarian to his friends and acquaintances to amaze them. After all, in his opinion, there is no rational explanation for why a man with such an attractive appearance would choose to be celibate. This amazement is not only characteristic of Ilya: in the parish they say there are several nuns who are so beautiful that any man would be happy to marry them, and only God's calling to celibacy could explain such an unusual decision for a layperson.

Those who have been to Rome at least once could hardly have failed to notice the famous *Calendario Romano* — a calendar with photographs of the Vatican priests, whose appearance is entirely consistent with the standards of the fashion industry, as is well known, exhibiting strict criteria of attractiveness for the male and female. Characteristically, those Catholics with whom I have raised the issue of the usefulness of this high-profile project have assessed it in positive terms. The task of this calendar, in their opinion, is to play on contradictions, to shock (“Of course, when you look at a Catholic priest or monk, you always think: ‘Why, why did he give up all this?’”; Irina, twenty-three years old), and through this conscious outrage to draw public attention to the existence of images of masculinity in chastity, alternative to popular secular images. Laypeople, monks, and priests who are most sensitive to beauty are looking for the same effect by using examples of a controversial combination of attractiveness and voluntary celibacy.

“We can see all this beauty too”: The Ethics of Persuasion

A demonstration of the inconsistency between people's own desires and God's plan becomes one of the discursive forms of persuasion both in the truth of the calling and in its closeness for any person. The high symbolic value of love, with the family as its socially acceptable form, is a strong argument in favor of the fact that the person has not defined this calling for themselves, but that they were truly called to do so. This demonstration places a particular emphasis on gender and its connotations. As a possible illustration of this form of rhetorical expression, I will cite one case that occurred during the celebration of the patron saint of musicians, St. Cecilia's Day, by the parish choir and their friends. Everyone present (besides me, there were almost the entire choir, the deacon, the acolyte, and a group of active parishioners) was drinking wine and engaging in lively conversation when suddenly two nuns joined the company. One of them — Sister Aneta, an ethnic Polish woman — had known everybody for a long time, the second sister was new to me and others. Sister Aneta introduced Sister Inna

to the audience and invited everyone to talk about themselves briefly. When the queue reached one of the participants, Natalia, she ignored the given format of communication and started asking questions herself. The following is the dialogue that I have recreated between Natalia and Sister Inna, in which, it must be admitted, some other participants unsuccessfully attempted to engage:

- It's my turn. Sister, how old are you?
- Forty-three.
- When did you think of the idea of becoming a nun?
- In 2000. Then I became a catechist in my parish, then I went to study, finished theology. Then I went to Africa.

The deacon said that it would be better if the sister told everyone about the ministry in Africa. But Natalia protested harshly:

- No, not better. Until you're twenty-something, it's a lifetime! I want to know what the woman experienced before she was twenty-five. Sister, by the time you were twenty-five, what did you have? A failed love, some broken dreams?
- Actually, when I went to the monastery, I had a great job, an apartment, no car, but that's because I'm afraid to drive. I was fine. I knew some men. Some of them were even willing to marry me.
- That's not an answer! Did you have a relationship with a man? I mean, a very deep love for a man.
- Yes.

The participants once again tried to intervene, now more openly and insistently, stating that such topics should not be discussed in the presence of a wide audience. Natalia's daughter directly pointed out that she was being extremely indecent. The only person who remained utterly calm and unembarrassed at that time was Sister Inna. Assessing that her interlocutor considered the answer to be insufficient, the nun continued:

- In fact, I was very much in love, and even when I went to the monastery, I was still in love. And now I'm in love with Jesus, and that's all.

This answer did not fully satisfy Natalia either, as she hastened to ask another question about the mutuality of this love. However, it remained unanswered because everyone began to get up from the table and to leave. Everybody felt very uncomfortable.

What was the cause of that embarrassment? Apart from the obvious — Natalia’s harsh and assertive style of communication and her questions about the private life of someone she hardly knows — this conversation could also be considered as unsuccessful for another reason. Even though Natalia joined the Catholic Church several decades ago, in this conversation, she demonstrated an attitude that was not typical for the local environment. Natalia not only refused to describe the choice of monasticism in a favorable light, as is customary in the church, but she questioned the appropriateness of this choice. In fact, Natalia stated that a woman becomes a nun when life in the world, and in particular the realization of herself through an intense romantic love, is not successful. Significantly, Sister Inna readily and quietly disagreed with her interlocutor, using a counterintuitive thesis: she became a nun, though she was successful with men, and fell in love. It should be noted that Catholics living in celibacy according to their vocation often have to present rebuttals based on this contradiction — however, mostly to those who do not belong to the Catholic Church. These circumstances arise quite frequently in the Russian context. In a predominantly secular culture, where the experience of romantic love is closely related to the search for oneself and one’s place in life and sexual freedom is connected to the affirmation of individual autonomy (Illouz 2013), the voluntary rejection of this form of sociality is puzzling and requires explanation. In the Church itself, such situations are rare, but as we can see, they are possible. Those few Catholics who, like Natalia, think that vows are a result of the ruined lives of “normal” men and women are usually considered to be lacking religious education.

Vocation narratives are often based on the scheme that a woman or a man discerned their calling for the religious life despite love, intense passion, dreams of marriage and family — feelings and desires associated with a gendered body. Articulation of this paradox is characteristic not only of such narratives but also of the description of one’s state of mind after taking eternal vows or ordination. Both prospective and present monks, nuns and priests have a recurring thought that they share without any prompting from the researcher:⁸ “In my celibacy, I remain a person who can fall in love. And what’s more, it is a natural thing.”

No one says a monk becomes a saint at once. There is, of course, a struggle, human nature in him is present even after he wears a monk’s robe,

8. The following are excerpts from interviews with priests and monks. Although these statements are addressed to the researcher rather than to laypeople, their citation is determined by the fact that similar statements in terms of content can be regularly recorded in the daily context of the interaction.

yes. We also see all this beauty, monks and priests, we see all this beauty that is around us and that surrounds us. But nobody says it's right there, you know ... it's still physiology, too, it's still human physiology, that's all. But there are vows, there are vows, there are vows, which a monk or a priest gave to the Lord God. [Father Igor, Franciscan, ca. fifty years old]

When I went to the monastery, I didn't stop being a woman, yes, and I think it's a good thing I agreed to it right away. [...] But I'm not giving it up, yes. Because I'm a woman. Not some sexless creature [...] but some specific one, with one particular gender. And it's probably very important to accept that I can experience different feelings, I can feel interested in some man. I can fall in love during my life. A billion of such situations can happen, and there is nothing terrible about that. [Arina, postulant,⁹ twenty-four years old]

When Stefania Palmisano wrote about the representatives of the new monasticism of Bose, an ambitious monastic project created in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, she identified two key rhetorical strategies for this environment: "We're no angels" and "We're not holier-than-thou" (Palmisano 2016, 82). Russian Catholic monks and priests are more conservative than Palmisano's informants, but they hold similar positions on this issue. This similarity, in my opinion, is due to the ethical principles that the church offers to people who have a calling to the priesthood or a monastic calling.

The idea of being elected to this least common path in the Catholic Church has no connotations of superiority. Therefore, speaking about one's calling necessarily includes an emphasis on the fact that one has become a monk, not because of having reached an inaccessible spiritual level, but only because God has defined their path in that way. You're no better than anybody else, and maybe even worse than others. However, the speech genre of the vocation narrative is not unique. The same strategy of authenticity production can be found in hagiographic texts and the descriptions of the wonders of visionaries. This simple logic is based, for example, on the narrative of the phenomena of the Marian apparitions in Lourdes, which are crucial for the mod-

9. Formation (monastic training) is a multistage process that takes up to ten years. The prepostulancy is the first stage of formation, in which the candidate lives with the community in the cloister and gets acquainted with the experience of monastic life. The stages follow the prepostulancy: postulancy (preparation for obedience), novitiate (obedience and preparation for temporary vows), juniorate or clericate (preparation for eternal vows and preparation for eternal vows and ordination, respectively).

ern Catholic Church. Indeed, hardly anything in the personality or fate of visionary St. Bernadette Soubirous could have foreshadowed the famous events. Bernadette was young,¹⁰ poor, with fragile health and with equally weak learning abilities, including religious ones. Andrea Dahlberg, in her study of the pilgrimage to Lourdes, notes that for the church authorities of the nineteenth century, who were in confrontation with philosophers and rationalists, visions, such as in Lourdes, became a resource for the establishment of the primacy of knowledge obtained supernaturally over knowledge acquired by intellectual effort. The first — mystical — type of knowledge was naturally related to “ordinary people,” who were alien to intellectualism. Thus, the experience of Bernadette Soubirous became all the more convincing in the eyes of contemporaries precisely because this girl was absolutely “unsightly” in social, intellectual, and physical terms (Dahlberg 1991, 31). So in this context, vocation narratives of monks and priests are particularly consistent with the tradition of Catholic self-representation of selectivity:

Some priests say before the seminary they did everything they could [*with the pressure*] to never be priests. So they’ve sinned so badly, and they’ve lived such a life that, uh, *a priest!* Not to be allowed in decent society. But it doesn’t matter to God. [Father Nicholas, priest, forty-nine years old]

The second strategy, outlined by Palmisano, reveals the veiled polemics of religious experts with the assertion of the asexual and disembodied status of the called Christian in the early church. Today, monks and priests’ presentation of themselves as people who are not outstanding in any way implies a reference to the gendered body that everyone has to take into account. A person called to consecrated life also bears the burden of original sin, is also prone to sin, and is not free from the desires of the flesh. Interestingly, this appeal to gendered embodiment is also a characteristic of the Catholic culture of rural northeastern Brazil, which was studied by the anthropologist Maya Mayblin. The saints venerated in this area are perceived by believers as close to them due to the commonly shared bodily experience in everyday life, especially the experience of daily bodily suffering. Reflecting on the earthly life of St. Rita of Cascia, known as “the married saint,” or the Virgin Mary, Mayblin’s informants think of their experiences in a specific gender dimension: they speak of married daily life and female physiology, the

10. About the young female visionaries and the persuasiveness of their images in the Catholic Church, see Maunder 2016.

torment of childbirth and the experience of motherhood. Even though the state of sanctity is inherently exclusive (saints lived and died according to a distinctive canon), for the faithful, it is the gendered nature of saints that in fact makes them the same as all ordinary people (Mayblin 2014, 272–73). References to the shared bodily experience of all and its consequences also create the effect of clarity and proximity of the vocation, making it easy to understand.

The Anthropology of Marriage and Celibacy

The call to a life of chastity per Catholic doctrine does not change human nature. The called Catholic continues to live in the same body, which has a desire for romantic love, and with the same vision, which sees attractiveness and beauty. In order to understand the mechanism of legitimization of this position, as well as its social consequences, it is necessary to return to Talal Asad's question about the construction of the relationship between sin and its potential condition. Let me provide another example regarding this question. One day, during the spiritual exercises at the Monastery of St. Anthony the Miracle Worker, the participants gathered in the monastery kitchen for tea and conversation in the time free from conferences and prayers. Franciscan friar Vasily was among those invited to the tea party. Lent was coming, so the discussion shifted to the subject of what they were inclined to give up during this period. One of the participants in the spiritual exercises in connection with this topic suddenly recollected the story of her Orthodox acquaintance. A priest came to one of the monasteries during the fast. Coming down to the dining room for dinner and finding the table almost empty, he wondered what the reason was for this restriction. "We've got fasting," women answered him. But the priest objected, "No, it's not a fasting. That's when everything's there, and you don't eat, that's real fasting." Everyone laughed, including friar Vasily. However, when the laughter calmed down, the monk shared the thoughts that the story had inspired in him and that were subsequently reconstructed in my field notes:

We have three vows — chastity, poverty, and obedience. But the most important thing is obedience. Because if you are faithful to your oath of obedience, you will definitely preserve both chastity and poverty. For example, I have an interest in women, too. I'm a normal guy, too. And if someone says he doesn't like women, that he doesn't feel anything, that he's not interested, it's not normal, it's psychiatry, it's a sick person. Then why do you need these vows? It's got to be a healthy feeling, it has to be lived.

This somewhat provocative statement is a good illustration of the problem that Asad has raised. It is well known that an act, the sinfulness of which is beyond doubt, requires a direct countermeasure. But one must first determine whether sin (or its possibility) is actually a sin (whether it be feelings, thoughts, fantasies, somatic experiences, etc.) before becoming a subject of concern. What may fall into the class of potential conditions depends on the historical and cultural context (Asad 1993, 103). In comparison with the early Benedictine monasteries, which required the monks to renounce their personal desires and embrace humility of the flesh in order to achieve salvation, in this case, as in the case of Asad's investigation of the pedagogical program of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the relationship between the potential conditions of sin and the actual sinful action has a different nature and different pragmatics. Here if something the celibacy requires one to abandon remains, that is when the vow of celibacy acquires its full meaning. Awareness of one's sexuality is not an exceptionally dangerous precondition for sin, because it allows the person who is called to constantly experience his or her promise of chastity.

"I'm a normal man," says the monk, and this does not seem inappropriate to anyone present. It should be noted that there is no longer a significant distance from the opposite sex for Catholics living in the promise of celibacy, as required by the early Christian tradition. Today, female parishioners and priests/monks may have friendly relationships. The social manifestations of these relationships can vary: frequent individual meetings and so-called spiritual conversations, travels and pilgrimages, joint activities, and other ways of relating without religious connotations, such as compliments, including to the appearance of parishioners. These forms of social interaction are often understood in terms of masculinity and (spiritual) paternity, i.e., in a paradigm that refers to quite specific gender values and opposes the androgynous image of a priest/monk.

To a large extent, such positioning is conditioned by modern Catholic ideas about the subject. Discussing the question of whether there can be gender of sin, Maya Mayblin writes that in the Catholic Church there are two different models of the subject: dualist and universalist. The first is based on an early Christian vision of human nature through the prism of its primordial and unchanging gender duality. This anthropology postulates the possibility of human existence in two fundamentally different, but complementary spiritual and physical forms — as a man or a woman. The second model, which became widespread in the 20th century and is related mainly to the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council, emphasizes that sinfulness and access to holiness are

common to all people, and the differences are more conventional and contextual than ontological (Mayblin 2017, 143–47). The anthropological model of vocation, realized in the principle of the universal call to holiness, is obviously universal in its form. According to this view of the subject, the paths to holiness are diverse, but they are of equal value. This equality of vocations is supported by a common mechanism for achieving holiness through voluntary self-sacrifice (*Dokumenty* 2004, 470). Paradoxically, it is only by renouncing oneself that a person actually finds him- or herself.

The local anthropology of vocation offers believers two basic forms of existence: marriage and celibacy, which are equally holy and both require self-denial. However, it is much easier for most unchurched people and new Catholics to reestablish a symbolic connection between sacrifice and chastity than between sacrifice and marriage. The consequences could be contradictory: neophytes tend to see in celibacy the fullest possible spiritual realization, or, conversely, something beyond their capacity. The modern project of pastoral support for vocations is aimed at relieving this tension. None of the religious authorities I know would ever say in public discussion that marriage is a vocation “by default” for those who are not ready to devote themselves to ministry in the church and who therefore choose the easiest way. In addition, I hear more often now that marriage is even more difficult than monasticism and priesthood, and that the family requires more commitment than living alone. Among other things a successful Catholic pastoral exhortation (for those who are responsible for it) teaches that both marriage and celibacy are equally legitimate paths of achieving salvation.

Surprisingly, this model of the subject is made universalist also by the expansion of the semantic potential of vocation at the expense of gender and sexuality; whether it is marriage, where gender and embodiment are obviously of particular importance, or consecrated life requiring celibacy. This congruence of vocations, which surprised me so much at the beginning of my fieldwork, is also due to the holistic approach of modern Catholic theology to the individual, which does not oppose the soul and the body, but unites them into a single whole. Therefore, the acquisition of a vocation to a particular path takes place within the framework of a person’s primary vocation to live in the male or female body. In this sense, the words of Svetlana, who once faced a difficult choice between marriage and monasticism, and now leads a catechism group and special meetings for married couples, are indicative. One of her main goals is to make it clear to a wide audience that marriage and chastity are not opposed to each other but have a common basis:

It seems to me that now there is a lot of distortion in the world, what is femininity, masculinity. And how does that even make me want to talk to young people, here. And this is the basis for being a very good priest, a monk, you have to be a good man, you know, a good man, I mean, a *real* man, and at the same time it is the basis for marriage. [Svetlana, catechist, thirty-two years old]

This is what constitutes the paradox of the Catholic anthropology of vocation: how can the universal vocation for holiness be gender specific? Exploring two issues the Catholic Church is challenged by — the question of the female priesthood, and the crisis surrounding the sexual harassment by the clergy — Mayblin shows how church elites can turn to a universalist or a dualist model to legitimize their positions. The remark about the creative appeal to explanatory models is quite correct in the context of the case at hand. By constructing the line of reasoning through the concept of equality and community of callings, the church authorities are solving two pastoral problems at once. The common denominator of marriage and celibacy is the subject's gendered body and its desires, which expands the prospects for “popularization” of the vocation to the consecrated life in an environment where voluntary chastity is seen as hardly achievable. The second function of this program is reflected in Svetlana's statement. Through the idea of a single, generalizing concept of vocation, the Catholic Church asserts among its congregation the notion of human duality — the correct images of male and female. Thus, the universalist anthropology of vocation acts as a counterbalance to its ideological antipode — the same universalist but “distorting” model of the constructed gender.

Conclusion

By including gender and sexuality in the concept of celibacy, the Catholic Church is attempting to overcome the vocational crisis. Specific rhetoric makes it possible to present consecrated life as attractive, as comprehensible and real, and in fact, not at all terrible. Despite the prescribed discipline of physical loneliness, it is not equated to the status of a disembodied and sexless angel. On the contrary, the modern Catholic anthropology of vocation polemicizes with the tradition of such a conceptualization of the body.

Rebecca Lester, expecting to see in the Catholic convent nuns who sought to “escape” from their own gendered bodies as obstacles to achieving holiness, faced a more curious state of affairs. One of the

most frequent statements among these nuns was: “A woman should always be a woman 100%” — and it, perhaps, most successfully illustrates the disciplinary and pedagogical program of this convent as a formation institute. This program, according to Lester, also aims to place the experience of individual vocation in the context of a religious protest against the modern liberalization of women and, as a consequence, the loss of truth about themselves. Postulants were taught to comprehend their life experience as invariably contradicting modern models of femininity (first of all, the image of an independent and sexually active woman). For them, this contradiction became a special sign of selectness to another, consecrated life. Thus, the cultivation of an emphatically feminine subjectivity (which becomes an alternative to the modern one) takes the form of a political statement in the process of monastic formation (Lester 2005, 13). Significant parallels can be found with the current pastoral policy of the Catholic Church hierarchy.

The primary object of this pastoral support is young people, who are overwhelmingly brought up in unchurched families and socialized in a secular culture that affirms the individual autonomy of the subject, in particular in the field of sexual life. And religious experts are quite aware of this fact and make it an issue of public reflection. Within the framework of this reflection, contemporary manifestations of individual rights and freedoms, especially those related to gender, take the form of an undeclared war against the individual and his or her dignity. One of the main critical arguments of the modern Catholic Church toward secular culture is the accusation that it draws a line between the personality and the body as between subjective and objective, which makes the latter a space for various manipulations. Church intellectuals link sexual liberalization (which leads to seeing body as an object of sale), the legitimization of abortion, euthanasia, and so on to this semiotic division and the proclamation of a “secular body,”¹¹ as well as the dissemination of ideas about the social construction of gender. Placing the concept of non-binary gender as one of the negative (according to the Catholic Church) consequences of so-called gender ideology makes the concept of divine vocation with its articulation of the original masculinity/femininity particularly convincing. All in all, it also makes the pastoral activities aimed both at maintaining gender roles and at increasing the attractiveness of celibacy consistent and not contradictory in the slightest.

11. For a discussion of the boundaries of the concept of secular body, see Hirshkind 2011.

Bibliography / References

- Albert, J.P. 1990. *Odeurs de Sainteté: La Mythologie Chrétienne des Aromates*. Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS.
- Asad, T. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Classen, C., D. Howes, and A. Synnott. 1994. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. London: Routledge.
- Dahlberg, A. 1991. "The Body as Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages to Lourdes." In *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, edited by J. Eade and M. Sallnow, 30–50. London: Routledge.
- Dokumenty II Vatikanskogo Sobora*. 2004. [Documents of the Second Vatican Council]. Translated by Andrei Koval. Moscow: Paoline.
- Hirshkind, C. 2011. "Is There a Secular Body?" *Cultural Anthropology* 26(4): 633–47.
- Illouz, E. 2013. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Jonveaux, I. 2011. "Asceticism: An Endangered Value? Mutations of Asceticism in Contemporary Culture." In *Religion and the Body*, edited by T. Ahlbäck, 186–96. Åbo: Tibo-Trading.
- Jonveaux, I. 2018. *Moines, Corps et Âme: Une Sociologie de l'Ascèse Monastique Contemporaine*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.
- Jonveaux, I., and S. Palmisano, eds. 2016. *Monasticism in Modern Times*. New York: Routledge.
- Jonveaux, I., E. Pace, and S. Palmisano, eds. 2014. "Sociology of Monasticism: Between Innovation and Tradition." In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 5. Leiden: Brill.
- Kormina, J., and S. Shtyrkov. 2017. "The Female Spiritual Elder and Death: Some Thoughts on Contemporary Lives of Russian Orthodox Saints." *State, Religion and Church* 4(2): 4–24.
- Lester, R.J. 2005. *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Maunder, C. 2016. *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in 20th-century Catholic Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayblin, M. 2014. "People Like Us: Intimacy, Distance, and the Gender of Saints." *Current Anthropology* 55(10): 271–80.
- Mayblin, M. 2017. "Containment and Contagion: The Gender of Sin in Contemporary Catholicism." In *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, edited by K. Norget, V. Napolitano, and M. Mayblin, 139–55. Oakland, CA: California University Press.
- Meyer, B. 2010. "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109(4): 741–63.
- Orsi, R.A. 2008. "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity." *Historically Speaking* 9(7): 12–16.
- Palmisano, S. 2016. *Exploring New Monastic Communities: The (Re)invention of Tradition*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Peperkamp, E. 2008. "The Fertile Body and Cross-fertilization of Disciplinary Regimes: Technologies of Self in a Polish Catholic Youth Movement." In *Exploring Regimes of Discipline: The Dynamics of Restraint*, edited by N. Dyck, 113–34. New York: Berghahn Books.