The ecclesial war on women religious and theologians reveals a dynamic of mansplaining, where male religious elites, threatened by the encroachment of women speaking with authority, react with hermeneutical violence toward those women. This hermeneutical violence, exemplified in the investigation of Elizabeth Johnson, follows Rebecca Solnit’s pattern of male-explicative violence rooted in what she calls the “archipelago of arrogance” or, in Catholic terms, the relative isolation of the Catholic clergy from Catholic higher education. The hermeneutical violence is further supported by the Balthasarian theological framework embraced by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which affirms the church (and thus everyone except the hierarchy) as essentially feminine and therefore primarily receptive of theological knowledge, not productive of it.

In April 2008, Rebecca Solnit published an essay entitled “Men Explain Things to Me: Facts Didn’t Get in Their Way,” about a phenomenon many women experience: the persistent need of some men to explain reality, even the reality of a woman’s own area of expertise, in a confrontational, clueless, and somewhat gendered way. In her essay, Solnit tells the story of a man who asked about her published books. When she remarked that she’d written several, Solnit recounts: “He said, in the way you encourage your friend’s seven-year-old to describe flute practice, ‘And what are they about?’” He then recommended...
what turned out to be Solnit's latest work as "a very important book on the subject," without realizing she was the author, so intent was he on holding forth his expertise and conscribing her to the role of the naïve girl. He continued to explain the topic even after he realized she was the author and she had figured out that he had not read the text, but the New York Times review of it. This example points to a larger reality experienced by women in many fields: the presumption of their ignorance and the gendered performances of overconfidence in men (the willingness to move to explication in the place of listening and receptivity) and of self-doubt and self-censorship in women (the assumption of having missed something or been misled previously). Solnit admits to this in her conversation with the very important gentleman: "so caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it." She concludes later: "Most of my life, I would have doubted myself and backed down . . . but . . . billions of women . . . [are] being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever."2

The gendered struggle for authority and truth has a long history in the Catholic Church. From Catherine of Siena's rebukes of Pope Gregory XI to Teresa of Avila's theological ruminations, Catholic theology is shot through with women's words and work. The tendency of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to obfuscate, silence, and otherwise undermine women's theological production represents an unfortunate companion piece to women's long theological trajectory. One need only look at the absence of women's voices in the theological canon or the gendered breakdown of the canon of saints to know that in the Roman Catholic Church, women have not been considered reliable witnesses to their own lives, or faith, or the faith of the church that they love. Feminist theology has grown in response to women's desire to claim theological truth as their property, to use Solnit's language.

The more recent professionalization of Catholic theology transformed the field into a modern academic discipline, which was originally reserved for the clergy and especially the bishops, who have historically composed the ordinary magisterium or teaching function of the church. However, among the changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council in the decades after 1965 was the opening of graduate programs in theology to laypeople, including women.3 Newly minted women academics (initially, mostly nuns) brought fresh perspectives to theological study. Contemporary Catholic feminist theology largely grew out of the interplay of new eyes exploring a long-studied, but male-dom-
mated tradition. Today, Catholic feminist theology attempts to foster a world
and a church that recognizes the full humanity and baptismal dignity of women
and thereby promotes the full human flourishing of women and men.

Several decades have passed since women entered Catholic theology pro­
grams, and along with women religious, laymen and women have grown in the
ranks of scholars of Catholicism (some were former priests and religious; as the
years went on, an increasing number were men and women who'd never spent
time in a seminary or convent). In the years I have attended its meetings, the
Catholic Theological Society of America has gotten younger and more diverse.
In a society whose group photo from four decades ago featured a handful of
non-priests, laypeople predominate today. At present, the society consists of
1,377 members, 456 of whom are women (approximately 33 percent), and 346
of whom are priests (approximately 25 percent). To highlight one pragmatic,
visible example: in recent years, CTSA began offering links to babysitting ser­
services available for attendees at its yearly convention. At the same time, many
smaller Catholic colleges and universities, long staffed by celibate religious men
and women, have had to elaborate parental leave policies for a younger, noncel­
bate faculty and staff. But these statistics, policies, and offerings represent small
indicators of the genuine shift involved in having women publicly enter the ac­
ademic conversation about Catholicism. Women's experience has brought new
insights interpreting scriptures and tradition, and laypeople continue to do this.

Women have challenged the nuptial metaphor for the church (the notion
of the church as the Bride of Christ), the pervasively sexist and idolatrous use
of male metaphors for God, and the anthropological underpinnings of John
Paul II's Theology of the Body. Ecological concerns buoyed by the desire to pre­
serve the earth for children, volumes about maternity, and articles rediscovering
the medieval notion of lactation as a metaphor for the Eucharist—these and
many more issues come to the fore when women take up the work of theology.
Of course, as successive generations of female scholars approach Catholicism as
an object of study, it becomes increasingly clear that women's experience is nei­
ther monolithic nor striving to become so—that humanity is, as Elizabeth John­

4 Women have been engaged in the Christian theological endeavor since the beginning of
Christianity, but their work has frequently been classified as "mysticism" instead of "philosophy,"
even in the case of women like Catherine of Siena, who called for ecclesial reform—hardly an eso­
teric mystical vision.

5 Even a quick perusal of CTSA's Proceedings archive yields dramatic evidence: in 1964, the
society admitted 118 new members, all of whom were men and only 2 of whom were not priests.
Three years later, of the 108 new members, 2 were laymen, 1 was a religious brother, and 4 were
women (all women religious). At the 2013 convention, 85 new members were admitted, 29 of whom
were women. The proceedings are available in .pdf form, and can be accessed at http://ejournaIs
.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/issue/archive.

6 Personal correspondence with Dr. Natalie Weaver, Secretary of the CTSA, on April 9, 2014.
It is important to note that the numbers might not be exact, as a person's clerical status is self-re­
ported, so there may be some ordained men on the roster who simply chose not to identify as such.
son stated, a constellation of characteristics of which gender is one, along with class, race, sexual orientation, and many others. Different women see different lacunae in the Christian theological tradition: some women take no issue with the institutional church, some find themselves outside of it, and many struggle to remain within it while preserving their desire to be recognized in their full baptismal dignity.\textsuperscript{7} The diversity of women's experiences, stances toward, and places in the institutional church reveals itself in the rich diversity of theological work women have produced in recent decades.

But there is much more to this story, particularly in the last five years. My focus in this article is the hierarchical magisterium's investigations and condemnations of women's work, exemplified in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) 2011 condemnation of Elizabeth Johnson's 2007 text, \textit{Quest for the Living God}. I chose the Johnson case because I think it most clearly illustrates the dynamic of gendered overconfidence and hermeneutical violence Solnit described and also because the details of Johnson's case are publicly available in scholarly texts. Other investigations and condemnations of women's work, including the silencing and exile of Ivone Gebara by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1995; the Vatican-sponsored supervision of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), an investigation which began in 2009 and ended abruptly in April 2015; and others also fall into a pattern of gendered hermeneutical violence but are not the central focus of this piece. Here, I contend that the facts of the Johnson case epitomize an act of hermeneutical violence in the style of the "mansplaining" to which Solnit alludes. I then explore the ways in which this violence is rooted theologically in a view of the church as essentially feminine and of the magisterium as fundamentally a proxy for a necessarily male, active God. Last, I look toward the future, by examining whether a new papacy will make much difference in the stance of the hierarchical magisterium toward women's theological work.

**Get Off My Lawn: Women's Encroachment and Hermeneutical Violence**

Solnit writes: "Every woman knows what I’m talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field, that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world."\textsuperscript{8} Though she stresses that not all men fall into this pattern, Solnit notes that the problem is rooted in gendered performance of

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\textsuperscript{7} By "tradition" I mean to imply the whole, vast, and variegated tradition of Christian theology and practice, understood as a complement/supplement to scripture and authoritative for Roman Catholic Christians.  
\textsuperscript{8} Solnit, "Archipelago of Arrogance."
overconfidence (in men) and lack of self-assertion (in women), a result of years of conditioning in which men assume the public world is theirs and women are taught self-control, self-doubt, and self-censorship. The resulting dynamic of male explanation and blindness toward female authority is what “mansplaining” describes. At first, this dynamic might seem innocent; something that could be attributed to the (relatively) new presence of women in male-dominated fields like engineering and theology, specifically, or academia, more generally, and the time it takes for that presence to register in the mainstream. But when examined further, the ends of mansplaining are as violent as the means. By assuming that a woman lacks expertise or needs a field explained to her, without ascertaining whether the woman has an authoritative grasp of the material in question, the person who “explains things” exhibits, at best, ignorance of the field in which s/he is purportedly an expert. More seriously, this mansplaining posture reveals a genuine bias, an assumption that a woman (or this woman, either because she is young or from a nondominant culture or otherwise other) could not possibly be an expert in this field. Most egregious—and what I argue is happening in the Johnson case—is the deliberate assuming of this posture of mansplaining in order to violently remind a woman that a particular field of influence (in this case, theology) is the province of male knowledge and male authority.

As when middle-class white women began working outside the home or when women were granted the right to vote, the intrusion of females into previously all-male spheres is not always met with great joy and welcome. Higher education gave Roman Catholic women the linguistic and philosophical tools to confront patriarchal structures in the church and the academy, and to challenge the sexism embedded in the theological tradition. This confrontation has rankled the magisterium, and in the last five years, women religious and theologians have endured intense criticism, supervision, and undermining of their work. While the Catholic Church has always enforced orthodoxy through the exercise of the ordinary magisterium, recent years have seen an unprecedented pattern of investigation and supervision of women. Some cases have featured the investigation of individual theologians, either by the CDF or by the local bishops’ conference; others are more wide-ranging, like investigation and supervision ordered by Rome of the LCWR, an umbrella organization that represents about 80 percent of the women religious in the United States. Here, I’d like to look closely at the details of the Johnson investigation, as they represent a paradigmatic example of gendered ecclesial violence.

On March 30, 2011, the USCCB issued a press release with the following title: “Bishops’ Doctrine Committee Faults Book by Fordham Professor.” The document then listed three summarizing bullet points:

- Sister Elizabeth Johnson’s *Quest for the Living God* distorts Catholic concept of God
The theologian in question, Elizabeth Johnson, a sister of the Community of Saint Joseph and Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University, had been notified of the investigation only the previous day, in an informal communication from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York and president of the USCCB. Though the USCCB had published guidelines for dialogue with theologians, this so-called “invitation to dialogue” came without warning (twenty-four hours does not constitute advance warning in a case like this) and the assessment and discussion by the bishops’ committee had occurred without Johnson’s input.10

The committee accused Johnson of serious doctrinal errors incompatible with fundamental Catholic doctrine. One journalist summarized the bishops’ statement thus:

The twenty-one-page document claims the book doesn’t “take the faith of the church as its starting point,” that it uses “standards from outside the faith to criticize and to revise in a radical fashion the conception of God revealed in Scripture and taught by the magisterium,” and that the book “contaminates the traditional Catholic understanding of God” and “completely undermines the gospel.”11

In the ensuing months, a sort of begrudging dialogue emerged between the Committee on Doctrine and Johnson, with Johnson skillfully composing a 16,000-word response in June to the bishops’ concerns that was essentially ignored when they reiterated their condemnations of Quest four months later. Theologians, even those who disagree with her, rushed to defend Johnson on the grounds that academic theology participates in the magisterium of the church as a community because of the training academics receive and the collegial correction that is a mark of academic discourse. Some critiqued the bishops’ methods for going against their stated norms for challenging the work of theologians.12 One even claimed that the bishops had overstepped

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12 These norms are set out in the NCCB document, Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians (Washington, DC: National Catholic Conference of Bishops, 1989).
their authority; the role of the bishops was to act as "umpires" in a sporting match.\textsuperscript{13}

Three things are important to note about the gendered violence inherent in this investigation. First, it was not timely—the book was three years old when the investigation started and the committee took a year to produce a report. When pressed on why the committee had not reached out to Johnson to answer questions about her text, the committee's spokesman and executive director, Father Thomas Weinandy, claimed that the committee thought it was an urgent matter to condemn the book and that it couldn't be delayed by a protracted dialogue with Johnson because the book was aimed at a popular audience and thus the faithful were in danger of being misled. It's worth noting that \textit{Quest for the Living God} had not been anywhere near the Amazon top sellers before the USCCB's statement was released. Published by an academic press, the book was never going to be a bestseller even in Catholic circles. At most, it would likely be assigned in some college courses or perhaps enjoyed by the educated layreader individually or in a study group. Moreover, the ideas expressed in \textit{Quest} weren't new for Johnson. The notion that language about God is necessarily analogical—in theology, it's at least as old as Aquinas—and the idea that the exclusive, pervasive, and patriarchal use of male language and imagery for God is idolatrous had appeared in her writings in the early 1990s. Like other forms of gendered harassment, there was nothing specific about this text that warranted attention, other than the presence of this female-authored text in a presumably male arena.

Second, the investigation was done entirely in secret, with Johnson's notification coming by way of Cardinal Dolan (USCCB president and thus the person who received all reports from the Committee on Doctrine) one day before the committee's statement was issued to the press. In my view, this process exemplifies the kind of harassment women regularly face. Not unlike street harassment, it was unsolicited, random, and unexpected. The intent is also the same—to remind women that they have entered a sphere that is not theirs. It's no coincidence that the USCCB's communiqués referred to Johnson exclusively by her ecclesiastical title not her academic one, despite her having never published as "Sister Elizabeth Johnson." This is a nonsubtle reminder of who has ecclesiastical power—the answer is never "Sister does." The dynamic of mansplaining hinges on this disqualification of women from authoritative power. Just as Solnit's conversation partner could not imagine that the woman in front of him would have expertise in the historical subfield he had selected for explanation, so too the Committee on Doctrine employed Johnson's ecclesiastical title to reinscribe the patriarchal ecclesial power structure. The title "Sister" does this by keeping the disagreement between Johnson and the bishops out of the

\textsuperscript{13} Gaillardetz, "Introduction to the Johnson Dossier," 289.
academic realm, where Johnson is at the very least on equal ground professionally with those on the committee who hold doctoral degrees. One could make the case that in an academic forum, Dr. Johnson, who has held a prestigious academic position for many years at a leading US Catholic university is in a more authoritative position than the men condemning her work. Thus, the committee only has the advantage on Johnson in an ecclesial sense, where the standing of women religious cannot compare to the influence of any bishop or group of bishops. This highlights the tragedy of the patriarchal structure of the church, which keeps eminent, capable women like Johnson permanently outside the Roman Catholic power structure.

Furthermore, the person believed to have drafted the critique of the book, Father Weinandy, is a scholar of Aquinas, which is also Johnson's area of expertise. As theologian Richard Gaillardetz states, "to read the committee's statement is to feel in the middle of a dispute between diverse theological commitments, not a dispassionate assessment of the doctrinal soundness of a theological work."14 This indicates that the dispute could well have occurred in the pages of an academic journal, not "in the court of doctrinal judgment."15 The secretive process gave way to a public ambush-style condemnation of Johnson's work. The parallels with street harassment are clear: this was unsolicited, surprising, unsettling, and meant to convey a sense of being watched or patrolled even in one's own familiar sphere (in Johnson's case, the spheres of the church and the academy). But the process was not the only flawed aspect.

Third, the committee's report completely misread the text and more fundamentally, completely misunderstood the task of theology vis-à-vis the church and catechesis. This last point stems from an ecclesiology that views the church as essentially feminine and therefore receptive and views the clergy and hierarchy as the proxies of a necessarily male God. For example, one of the committee's recommendations to Johnson was that she should have sought an imprimatur—an episcopal endorsement stating that nothing in the text contradicts authentic doctrine. There are (at least) two flaws with this. The first, as Gaillardetz notes, is that there's no reciprocal model—the imprimatur is the sole avenue for dialogue between bishops as teachers and theologians as teachers. No bishop has ever been required to submit ideas to the academy for vetting, even though "Holy Orders doesn't confer scholarly expertise."16 The use of the imprimatur presumes that only the hierarchy has the power to teach and confirm teaching, but the realities of higher education, especially in the United States, differ greatly.

The second, more theologically problematic issue with the imprimatur is

14 Ibid., 287.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 288.
the assumption that doctrine does not develop, that the deposit of faith is a
static reality definitively revealed and guarded by the bishops. This proposi-
tional model of divine revelation was defeated at the Second Vatican Council,
in particular in *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, which notes
that “the church is always moving toward the plenitude of truth.”17 It does not
state that the church is in complete possession of the truth. A defensive pos-
ture toward the static, once-and-for-all “deposit of faith” model of revelation
excludes marginalized voices and induces a kind of sclerosis of faith, rendering
the church unable to engage the contemporary world. In addition, Johnson’s
arguments neither object to nor contradict doctrines about God—about the
Trinity, or about the Incarnation—but rather about doctrinal formulations that
have been biased in character by excluding the experience of women and the
female language and imagery already found in scripture.18

The conflation of theology with catechesis or the reduction of theology to
the repetition of the catechism or of magisterial statements is not unique to
the investigations of women mentioned here. What, then, makes the investi-
gation of Johnson different from those of, for example, Jesuit theologian Roger
Haight, who was silenced in 2004, or liberation theologian Jon Sobrino?19 It
strikes me as obvious that the “theological war on women” or “clerical war on
female theologians and women religious” has at its root a rejection of women’s
rightful place as interpreters of scripture and tradition. One sees this pattern in
many different kinds of harassment—and investigation by the CDF can amount
to harassment, particularly if it is done in secret, because it can potentially jeop-
ardize a scholar’s employment at a Catholic university or their ability to teach
Catholic theology in any venue. As such, the investigation of Johnson’s book (an
investigation that was neither timely nor public), the content of the investiga-
tion, and the questions posed and the ways in which they were posed, revealed
assumptions on the part of the Committee on Doctrine that point to a pervasive,
unrepentantly sexist view of the theological endeavor. The condemnation-am-
bush sought to remind “Sister” Johnson that this theological world was not hers
but the bishops’ and that the interpretation of Aquinas is not authentically wom-
ren’s work but the province of the ordained. The characteristics of Johnson’s re-

17 Austin Flannery, OP, ed., *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, in
chap. 8.


19 These theologians were notified of the investigation of their work by the CDF, possibly
because as Jesuits their order has a presence in Rome and therefore some proximity to the sources
of the investigation. In general, because women religious (like all women) exist outside the deci-
sion-making structure of the church, it is likely more difficult for information from within the hierar-
chy to make its way to them unless this dissemination is intentional.
sponse parallel Solnit's exposition of what mansplaining does to women, causing them to question their authority and reassert their qualifications.

In response to the committee's explanation of her own expertise, in an example concerning the analogical nature of language about God, Johnson responds with an assertion of her qualifications to interpret the Thomistic tradition authoritatively. She writes:

my position on the nature of religious language has from my early years followed the Catholic tradition on analogy. I did my doctoral dissertation on analogy . . . have claimed analogy as the theory guiding my work in several scholarly publications translated into numerous languages. The heading stated above attributes to me a position I have simply never held. The proper heading would be: True Presupposition: all names for God are analogies.20

Johnson is defending not only the content of her text but also her authority to have written it. Her statement frequently foregrounds this "I have a right to speak about Thomas" affect.

After the committee's initial report condemning the perceived errors in the text, Johnson's ten-point rebuttal of the committee's claims cited not only Aquinas but also a variety of theologians and philosophers of religion on the task of theology and the nature of God-language. Weinandy separately wrote a private letter to some associates, using USCCB letterhead, that included several critiques not listed in the committee's official statement. Someone shared this letter with Johnson, who immediately wrote to Cardinal Wuerl, chair of the committee, and appended a response to the additional critiques in Weinandy's personal communication. His letter read in part:

Admittedly, it is a tricky business to explain how our language does and does not apply to God. Still, Sr. Johnson should understand the subtle distinctions made by Aquinas. It seems that Sr. Johnson rejects the idea of some names applying literally to God as part of her project to displace traditional masculine names for God. Only when all names for god are reduced to metaphors, will one be free to choose the names which best serve one's purpose.

Note the belittling use of her ecclesiastical title, the presence of the word "tricky" as if he were explaining long division to an eight-year-old, and the more sinister accusation that Johnson deliberately distorts Aquinas's understanding of the word *proprie* in an effort to further her radical feminist agenda.

Johnson's response to these secondary accusations is effective not only on the level of content but also of style. It appears in the form of a Thomistic question, as one would find in the *Summa*. It begins with a proposition, states the

objection of Weinandy, and even has a sed contra subheading. This does not seem accidental. The first words of the sed contra are: "Having taught Aquinas' views on God-language for decades, I presumably have some understanding of the subtle distinctions his position stakes out." She continues by analyzing propriety linguistically and Thomas's use of it theologically. Her response is more than adequate from a theological perspective and goes beyond the neoscholastic framework informing Weinandy's interpretation to a more wide-ranging understanding of Thomistic theology embraced by contemporary scholarship. Weinandy's critiques, particularly his personal letter, amounted to a theological "get off my lawn." The problem, of course, is that the committee wasn't yelling at a teenager on roller skates, but rather a meticulous, and quite mainstream, well-respected Catholic theologian. The result was a calm but firm assertion: "I've been teaching Aquinas for decades. This is my lawn."

The bishops' investigation of Johnson typifies the unsolicited, unwarranted, harassing nature of mansplaining as described by Solnit, but in a theological and hermeneutical key. This sort of gendered hermeneutical violence, where men explain to women areas of the women's own expertise, is not new with Johnson's case, of course. One precursor was the two-year-long silencing and exile of Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reversing the decision by the Brazilian bishops, who had reviewed her writings and closed their case against her. A more recent analog involves the investigations of the LCWR by the CDF, which launched a doctrinal assessment of the organization in 2008, and the Apostolic Visitation by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), which began in 2009. If we look at the timing of these two investigations of LCWR and add to them the Johnson investigation and that of the work of Margaret Farley, a Sister of Mercy and Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School (an investigation that began in 2012), it is not difficult to discern a disturbing pattern in the investigative behavior of the hierarchy. Though not all the women were investigated in the same fashion or by the same ecclesiastical body (LCWR was in fact investigated by two separate offices in the hierarchy simultaneously!), the impetus seems to be similar: an attempt to invalidate women's contributions to the fields of theology and ministry without reading (in the scholars' cases) or assessing (in LCWR's case) these contributions fairly, if at all. In Johnson's case, Weinandy felt that she was interpreting Aquinas incorrectly, granting the trickiness of the linguistic complexity. In Farley's case, the Committee on Doctrine claimed that she distorted Catholic moral teaching on masturbation, homosexuality, and homosexual unions, even

though *Just Love* plainly states that it is not attempting to explain the Roman Catholic moral tradition on these issues but rather to explore different possible norms.

The LCWR case is particularly egregious on the part of CICLSAL, as the very fact of an apostolic visitation is so completely anomalous that it is reserved for persons or institutions "credibly accused or suspected of or embroiled in serious moral, religious, spiritual, doctrinal, financial, civil, or other types of misconduct or conflict whose solution the unit in question cannot, or will not, undertake on its own."23 The implication that the women in these communities were not only inadequately embodying the mission of the church but also harming that mission is preposterous when one considers the fact that the religious communities the LCWR represents do the majority of the church's mission work in the United States. Women religious staff hospitals and schools, teach in universities, and are in many ways the most widely encountered face of the church. The claim of the bishops that they know the mission of the church more than the women who embody it is quite obviously a form of condescending explanation. Many saw the CDF’s appointment of an episcopal supervisor, essentially a mission chaperone, as an infantilization of these women, many of whom have advanced degrees and experience running large institutions. As Catholic feminist theologian (and woman religious) Sandra Schneiders noted, "A number of features of the current investigation of religious are problematic or repugnant to intelligent, educated, adult women in Western society."24 Interestingly, not a single order of male vowed religious was included in either the apostolic visitation by CICLSAL or the CDF’s doctrinal assessment. Why not? Is it the presumption that the brothers embody the mission of the church in sound, orthodox ways as opposed to the doctrinally dangerous women religious? Is it the relatively small amount of vowed religious men in the United States? Or is it that men are deemed permissible in public, authoritative ecclesial spaces like schools and hospitals (and universities) and women simply are not?

In all these women's cases, clerics attempt to critique and to explain, indeed mansplain, the very foundations of the women's thinking (and in the case of LCWR, their lives) to them, as if they were annoying adolescents, intruding on the serious work of the church. Aside from being egregious cases of hermeneutical violence, this posture has many consequences. It perpetuates the lie of the docile, servile, subservient "Sister"—which is categorically false from a historical perspective but politically and patriarchally effective in the church. The mansplaining approach also reminds the magisterium, and attempts in vain to remind the rest of the world, that the intellectual work of the church should

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24 Ibid., 36.
be limited to repetition of accepted norms and more important, should be done exclusively or ultimately only by ordained men. Why did Johnson’s investigation happen? To return to Solnit’s language, the hierarchy lives on its own “archipelago of arrogance.” Isolated from women’s reality and experience and increasingly isolated from the realities of the contemporary academy, the bishops and the Committee on Doctrine chose to condemn first and dialogue second. Furthermore, the committee perhaps sensing the rising waters of women’s full humanity and of their own (the hierarchy’s) compromised authority in the wake of the sex-abuse scandals, sought out what seemed like easy targets—vowed women religious, who, like all laypeople, have no ecclesiastical power vis-à-vis the hierarchy. The isolation of the hierarchy is evident as recently as the last papal election. During the conclave in March, Father Federico Lombardi, the spokesman for the cardinal-electors, was asked if women were participating in the conclave. He responded that “women are involved in the whole preparation involved for the conclave, in serving the fathers” at the hotel.

Vessels of Fulfillment: Theological Underpinnings of the Clerical War on Women

In attempting to understand what motivates the men who explain things to her, Solnit writes, “Explaining men still assume that I am, in some sort of obscene impregnation metaphor, an empty vessel to be filled with their wisdom and knowledge.” While Freudian psychologists may put forth theories on what, precisely, women lack, in Catholic theology, the phrase “empty vessel” points most clearly to the theology of Mary (and of women more generally) rooted in Aristotelian/Thomistic logic and most recently expressed in the work of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar, whose theological aesthetics have grown influential in Roman Catholic theological circles, held a doctoral degree in Germanic studies and, despite never holding an academic post, published widely in topics both highly theoretical and politically polemical, from dense Trinitarian theology to passionate arguments against women’s ordination. While some scholars have recently attempted to reconcile or at least initiate a dialogue between Balthasar and feminist theory and theology, his thoroughgoing espousal of heterosexual complementarity as the cornerstone of his theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and theology of God render him, to

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my mind, a key source of antifeminist thought and an important ally for those seeking to deny women's full humanity in the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps unsurprisingly, von Balthasar's work rose to prominence during the pontificate of John Paul II and continued to ascend in the years of Benedict XVI's papacy. Both John Paul and Benedict were known for espousing similar ideas about the nonnegotiable, even divine, origins of heterosexual complementarity, and these ideas about biological sexual difference and complementarity are definitely present in both men's reasons for excluding women from ordination.

Balthasar's thought was important to Benedict XVI and to John Paul II before him, and we see echoes of this thought in their writings. Sexual difference and sexual polarity were, for Balthasar, the sine qua non of human existence and the cornerstone of theological anthropology. Extrapolating from his understanding of sexual relations "in all times and cultures," where the man initiates sexual activity, Balthasar ascribed action, initiative, responsibility, and leadership to males, calling these masculine features. In a complementary way, he attributed openness, availability, receptivity, and obedience to females, calling these traits feminine, or womanly.

Balthasar devoted a great deal of time in his work to the task of defining woman. She is man's answer, the gaze that meets his in a responsive manner, and she is man's helpmate and home. Woman is also, according to Balthasar, "the vessel of fulfillment specially designed for him." In Balthasar's thought, we see reflected the mind of a theological mansplainer. Most revealing in Balthasar's definitions of woman are the attributes that are excluded, what women are not: authoritative, intelligent, capable, or rational.

Also informing Balthasar's understanding of the relationship between man and woman was his perception of the reproductive act. Based on this, he judged that it is woman's role to be "receptive and open," responding to man's initiative.


31 The scriptural image of the church as the Bride to Christ's Bridegroom provides much of the (non-Aristotelian) underpinning for this understanding of sex and gender. Many have noted, however, that the nuptial metaphor for the church succeeds precisely because of the inequality between female and male—Christ/God must necessarily be more powerful, knowledgeable, important than the church if the image is to work at all as an analogy. See Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 111–14.

“through reproduction,” that is, by giving the child back to the man as a response. Here, Balthasar relied on the assumption that women conceive “from” men and that the man’s contribution to reproduction is generative whereas woman’s role is passive and nurturing. This is rooted in the notion that the man’s sperm is the sole source of life, which is nurtured by the woman in the womb. In this understanding the woman’s role cannot be described as generative, except in a passive way. Thus, Mary’s physical role in the incarnation was one of “purely womanly . . . surrender” where her body (her womb) is used as the vessel of the incarnation, and women in general cannot generate truth, only incubate it. The problem this outlook poses for women theologians is evident.

Womanliness is further characterized not only by surrender and receptivity, but also by a lack of understanding, which Balthasar also names lack of self-knowledge. Femininity is not “dominance and comprehension . . . but . . . humble and handmaidenly following and service.” Woman’s lack of comprehension as implied here is ontological, in her nature. This type of thought, common to most theories of sexual complementarity operative in the work of the hierarchy and recent popes, leaves no room for women’s scholarly contributions, or even for the possibility of female scholarly production since understanding and rationality are coextensive with maleness. None other than Ivone Gebara noted the following as she wondered why more bishops, popes, and curial officials don’t read modern or contemporary feminist theology, which has been produced for nearly five decades. “But these texts are not studied in the major schools of theology, especially by the future clergy in training, or in the institutes of consecrated life. Church officialdom doesn’t give them citizenship rights because women’s intellectual production is still considered inappropriate.

33 Ibid., 286.
34 Balthasar, The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 184. While he does not use the word passive, it is difficult to see how Balthasar contrasts the man’s generative role to the woman’s in procreation without her being a passive recipient of what is being generated by the man. Balthasar seems to deny this in Theo-Drama: “Nor is [woman] simply the vessel of his fruitfulness; she is equipped with her own explicit fruitfulness.” But he betrays this egalitarian impulse when he continues: “Yet her fruitfulness is not a primary fruitfulness: It is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man’s fruitfulness (which, in itself is helpless) and bring it to its ‘fullness’ ” (Balthasar, Theo-Drama, 285). An ability or gift, in this case “fruitfulness,” that is secondary and “answering” cannot be initiatory, and because it is relegated to reaction, in this case through the nurturing environment of the womb (which a woman does not actively cultivate), I interpret woman’s role in reproduction, and a central feature of femininity, as passivity, despite Balthasar’s words.
36 “[Mary’s] faith, with its love and hope, in its womanly openness to the divine . . . is coextensive with the masculine principle . . . even though it is not part of its womanly character to comprehend totally, in the manner of the Bridegroom” (Balthasar, Spouse, 161).
37 Ibid., 165.
for male theological rationality." Clearly, her experience with the hierarchy, including forced exile and the study of "traditional theology" in Belgium did little to quiet Gebara's feminist convictions. As evidenced in the Johnson case, the notion that a woman might interpret Thomas at all (much less more nimbly than a cleric trained in neoscholasticism) was met with suspicion, condescension, and explanation. It seems the hierarchy agrees that rationality is male and emptiness or lack of understanding is female.

With this divisive view of sexual polarity, it's no wonder that the hierarchy has undertaken the investigation of women theologians and women religious in ways characterized not only by a hermeneutic of suspicion but also by a hermeneutic of mansplaining. Some in the church may have thought that the bishops were finally exerting some measure of oversight over a rogue group of dissenting theologians, that the role of the bishops as teachers was again coming to the fore. But what was in fact going on went beyond a suspicion of women's scholarly work, flourishing into a gendered campaign of intimidation and silencing meant to remind women that the work of Catholic theology is a male endeavor. Sadly, this hermeneutic of mansplaining is not unfamiliar to most women.

Since these "investigative intimidation campaigns" began in 2009, I have witnessed their impact on a small group of Catholic female theologians. Briefly, the investigations achieved what mansplaining sets out to do: it destabilized the voices of young women, who wondered whether their feminist commitments should be hidden when looking for jobs, whether their scholarship would be subjected to the same sort of scrutiny as other feminist theologians, and ultimately, whether they were hurting themselves by associating with the feminist movement. In this way, the hermeneutical violence of mansplaining ripples outward to successive generations of students and bystanders. Of course, many graduate students share the fears of postdegree job searches, suitability, availability, and fit. And, in truth, the secular, non-vowed woman has not come under the kind of scrutiny that women religious have, for a variety of reasons. The non-vowed laity, because of its relative powerlessness within church structures, likewise finds itself relatively immune from episcopal intervention. Ironically, then, secular women's invisibility in the church's power structure renders them relatively safe from the sorts of investigations that have plagued women religious since 2009. With the numbers of non-vowed laypeople holding academic

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39 The majority of academic theologians employed at private colleges and universities work under contracts that are not invalidated by ecclesial investigation. Though, of course, a college president could be pressured by the local ordinary to discipline a professor, the protection of tenure, however, seems pretty solid. As far as I know, this has not been tested.
As we look ahead, can we expect that the exercise of the magisterium will change under Pope Francis? This young papacy presents some cause for concern but also, I believe, some hopeful indications. So far, Francis’s public statements on women and femininity do not impel the church toward an egalitarian reality. It’s clear from his statements that he, too, espouses the femininity of the church, along with a problematic notion of Mary the mother of Jesus as important in a symbolic but not authoritative way. Francis’s statements tend to pedestalize women, claiming that ordination amounts to a sullying “clericalization” of the feminine (a contamination that does not, it seems, apply to men in the same way). The stereotypical idea of women as “important” nurturers does nothing to remedy the ills outlined above. Yet, there remains one aspect of Francis’s priorities that could work against the mansplaining tendencies of the magisterium: his resurrection of the norm of collegiality. This idea, that the church should be run by the whole college of bishops acting as a body, relies on the principle of subsidiarity—that problems should be handled as locally as possible.

An even more encouraging sign was the abrupt end to the CDF investigation of LCWR that was revealed in a surprising announcement in April 2015. While all parties involved, including spokespersons for the team of episcopal overseers and the LCWR, insisted that the result of the abbreviated investigation was fruitful dialogue and a growth of mutual respect, it is difficult to overlook that the women religious retained the autonomy not only to pick the speakers at their conferences but also to select the theological experts who would vet these speakers and the LCWR’s publications. One might imagine that the women could choose theological experts from among their own ranks, which include many prominent theologians, ethicists, and canon lawyers. This, too, can be seen as an effect of Francis’s pontificate, which is centered more on mercy and generosity of spirit than on doctrinal uniformity. A more pragmatic view would suggest that the pope is trying to minimize potential tensions ahead of his visit to the United States in fall 2015. Still, that the investigation concluded two years ahead of schedule is indeed an encouraging sign.

More broadly, Francis has seemed intent on replacing the “culture of life/death” language espoused by John Paul II and the “dictatorship of relativism” image used by Benedict XVI with a more dialogical “culture of encounter” model, reminiscent of John XXIII. We see this in his willingness to talk openly and off-the-cuff to the press, his engagement with non-Catholics and non-Christians, and his commitment to the poor and especially the imprisoned. If he can succeed in making the church more collegial, in decentralizing power...
instead of concentrating it in Rome, this could mitigate against the isolation of the magisterium and combat the archipelago of arrogance that characterizes the stance of so many bishops. A culture of encounter would encourage the magisterium to engage in fruitful dialogue with theologians, who constitute a teaching office in the church as well, though not one with sacramental authority. More collaboration, especially given the numbers of women who work in and for the church, should lead to more women’s voices in the conversation. If the USCCB adopted the “culture of encounter” as its model for engagement with theologians, we could see a functioning hierarchy that allows the academy to do its work of honing theological thought for the contemporary world and simultaneously allows the episcopal office to retain its teaching function in a collaborative model alongside professional theologians.

Ultimately, however, Francis’s retrieval of collegiality leaves the responsibility for change in the hands of the bishops and the national bishops’ conferences. Because of this, any hope for change does not rest on Francis’s actions, but rather on the legacy of episcopal appointments left behind by Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the CDF during Gebara’s investigation and silencing) and John Paul II. These two past popes are responsible for appointing nearly the entire body of current Roman Catholic bishops. As a result, growing collegiality, which Francis has indicated as a goal, will amplify the bishops’ voices, voices which we have seen at work in Johnson’s investigation, for example. This emboldening of the episcopacy does not bode well for women’s scholarly work, at least in the United States, where the USCCB has demonstrated that the hermeneutic of mansplaining is the modus operandi for interacting with women’s theological production.

In the end, can feminists glean anything productive, some ray of hope from the hermeneutical violence inflicted on scholars like Johnson? Perhaps, the answer lies not in looking toward the papacy or the hierarchy but toward each other. As seen in the anecdote with which I began this article, Solnit’s encounter with the mansplainer ends with levity as she is able in the end to laugh with a friend about the ridiculousness of the experience. Inasmuch as the experiences of women detailed above have raised the profile of women religious in the United States and rendered them visible agents of the Catholic Church’s mission, have drawn attention to the work of magisterial feminist theologians like Johnson, and have forged solidarity among theologians and feminists (and feminist theologians) across the country, one might say that bringing the hermeneutic of mansplaining to light has been beneficial, though the experiences themselves remain acts of violence. Still, the creation or reinforcing of solidarity, while necessary for the academic endeavor, is insufficient. What remains to be seen is how scholars will embrace the idea that in this solidarity the academic magisterium does its best work in the search for liberating truth and whether the bonds of solidarity will bear fruit and goad us to speak that truth to power.
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